

## Imprints of Mythology in Devdutt Pattanaik's: *Jaya- An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*

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### Abstract

Indian mythology or Hindumythology becomes the prime element and the most tempting topic among the most contemporary Indian novelists who has used these mythological characters as a literary device in their works. This paper will talk about the book *Jaya- An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* written by a very popular writer Devdutt Pattanaik. The book reflects a very logical and distinct idea of how the scriptures and mythological characters have a very powerful and affectionate approach to life that is missing in 'modern' society. The paper deals with the question of why the modern writers borrowed the contents from these Oral Literatures and why the interpretations do vary from one another. The writer calls it as a 'work in progress'. The Explanations can never ever be solutions. Individuals need solutions. Cultures need solutions. A solution to the conundrum called life. Human life is not governed by logic. Emotions that drive humanity – love, hate, fear, greed, ambition – cannot be rationalised. Human beings therefore cannot make sense of life through scientific, evidence-based discourses. There is no escape from myth. This paper illustrates the Mahabharata through the eyes of Devdutt conveying a very new perspective and allows us to verge upon the traditions to reconstruct and prove the past reality of India.

**KEYWORDS-** Illustrated discussion on Myth, Evidences from the past, Retelling stories from the Mahabharata, Idea and frame of references, Finding reality, Purpose of moulding our lives according to the past reality, the new depth on the past readings.

Myth is the traditional stories, tales or the celebrated form of expression of a meditative mind which had been told by the ancient sages and seems to define the religious aspects of human existence. The word myth has been derived from the Greek word Mythos which means words or stories which are related to the religion or about the folk culture of that time. Myth and the religious scriptures are the most authentic and reliable source of our great cultural legacy which are being retold by our modern writers in a new arena. A collection of myth, especially one belonging to a particular religious or cultural tradition is the dictionary definition of mythology. It is also defined as a set of stories or beliefs about a particular person, institution, or situation, especially when exaggerated or fictitious. We need to understand that mythology is a branch of knowledge that deals with narratives about Goddesses & Gods, demi-gods, legendary personalities of different civilizations and their cultures. Traditions, folklore and legends are similar to and sometimes part of Mythology. Everybody sees the world through a frame of reference. No one, but the gods, perhaps, have the full picture. Fates, free will, God — three frames of references that have sustained cultures for centuries; references that can never be proved or disproved; they have to be believed. And when believed, can help individuals and communities thrive.

Since mythology typically absorbs superhuman characters, it is important for us to accept them with a “time-perspective”. We also need to have a clear idea about our traditions and beliefs of our respective cultures to bond with it better. The volume of knowledge in the myths not only transmits religious experiences, but also projects role models of behaviour patterns. They explain patterns of worship and attempt to reconnect the modern society to the forgotten ages. It is all done in a spirit of perfect detachment—all the Hindu religious classics are pre-occupied with the concept of **sarvmukti** or universal redemption. They teach us to overcome anger by love, evil by good, greed by being liberal, and falsehood by truth and so on. Evil should be restrained by force, says the Mahabharata **sastradapi**—either by the means of our traditions or by means of weapons. Indian faith in divinity is rational, ethical and spiritual in form and spirit both. Almost all Indian religious faith—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have their origin in the Upanishads and the Vedas which deal with self-conquest—the greatest conquest of a man.

Greeks sought Truth using reason: an understanding of the world that when argued at any time at any place yielded the same result. This was logos, logic, and rationality. It gave birth to science and mathematics. It revealed how people are ‘actually’ born and how the sun ‘actually’ rises. It took man to the moon. But it never gave the reason why man exists on earth in the first place. Science tells us ‘how’ not ‘why’. Explanations can never ever be solutions. Individuals need solutions. Cultures need solutions. A solution to the conundrum called life. A solution that gives meaning and purpose, tools to cope with crisis, justify ambition and build communities. One has no choice but to withdraw into constructed realities, cling to a frame of reference, any frame of reference with all its inherent limitations. There is no escape from myth. Myth is not always concrete; in fact it has no certainty. To experience the idea of fate, free will or God one needs to dig into the history. One ought to look for the stories, symbols, ritual- language that is heard and seen being followed. The body of stories, symbols and rituals that communicates a myth to a people is called Mythology. All cultures – Hindu, Christian, Greek or American – are guided by a myth communicated through a mythology.

Indian religion is the religion of spirit and not of a historical and dogmatic institution. In Rig-Veda many gods such as Rain god, Fire god, Wind god, Water god, Sun god etc. are being praised for their respective mastery and mercy. The two great Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were written by Valmiki and Ved Vyasa respectively. The Ramayana deals with the ‘leela’ of Bhagwan Ram—an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He is the Sagun Brahma of Treta Yuga. He is Purushottam—an ideal human being who establishes Dharma and eliminates all the demons haunting the Earth. Janaki, the Mother of the world is his consort and Lakshman is an incarnation of Sheshanaga. The Ramayana by Valmiki is composed in Sanskrit and it delineates the entire Indian philosophy of Nirgun Brahma and Sagun Brahma. Similarly, the Mahabharata deals with the Rasa-leela of Lord Krishna who is the second great incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Almost all events in the Mahabharata are pregnant with ethical and moral lessons. The most important part of this epic is the message given by Krishna to Arjuna which is but spiritual knowledge. It is also written in Sanskrit. Shrimad Bhagavad Gita also highlights the divine knowledge.

Later on, a number of Ramayana’s were written in different Indian languages, out of which the Ramcharitmanas by Goswami Tulsidas became very popular in the whole country. It was written in the language of common people and it became so popular

that even illiterate people sing the lines of Ramcharitmanas. Similarly, Sursagar by Surdas enumerates the Rasa-leela of Sri Krishna in the language of common people. It also became very popular in the whole of the country and even illiterate people also sang bhajans written by Suradas.

India was attacked from time to time by foreign aggressors and it remained a slave country for a thousand years. During the foreign regime in the country, India lost its glory and educational institutions and many major temples were completely destroyed. Despite foreign aggression and regime, Indian culture was able to survive due to the tradition of folk tales and folk songs. Majority of folk tales and folk-songs originates from the ancient Indian Holy scriptures like the Vedas, Puranas, The Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Indian folk-songs are sung even by the uneducated and illiterate people of the country. There is no denying the fact that folk-songs are life-force of Indian culture and tradition. Dharma is the realization of Brahma in our own being. It is related to the inner progress and elevation of our soul. It has also to do with the mystical experience of the Infinite. For common people, there are rituals and festivals which teach them to move towards spiritual perfection. This is the reason why Dharma is related to prayers bhajans, kirtans, puja and jap on many occasions. Indian festivals are celebrated for the sake of social obligations, inner pleasure and entertainment. It is through folk-songs, folk-dance and festivals that the Hindus put their beliefs to practice which has stood the taste of time. It is a fact that Indian oral systems of folk-songs have made Indian culture and tradition survive through centuries despite the slavery for ten centuries.

The theme of this paper is to deal with an intense study and analysis of a much read book **Jaya- an Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata (2010)** which has won worldwide acclamation and appreciation. The book is a comprehensive interpretation of an ancient Hindu epic by Devdutt Pattanaik. The author is a medical doctor by education, a leadership consultant by profession and a mythologist by passion (from the book; about the author). Devdutt writes on importance of mythology in contemporary times, especially in areas of management, governance and leadership. Devdutt comprehends the importance of decoding mythology and assembles them in his writings relevantly. His stories bear a proper decoding of symbols, images and rituals from the Puranas as an attempt to show what they are trying to communicate and not a venture to impose the reality of society on that.

The book **Jaya- an Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata** is a retelling of the great Hindu epic the Mahabharata. The book has been divided systematically in 18 chapters restructured to facilitate easy reading. The book starts with an “author’s note: What Ganesha Wrote” (Jaya. p- ix) followed by the “Structure of Vyasa’s Epic”. In the end of these sections, one will find charts and tables describing a brief understanding about the whole information in a very elementary manner. The main purpose of his unconventional and engaging style of writing is mainly in order to get connected with the new generation. Moving on further, the next segment of the book starts with a “Prologue: The Start of the Snake Sacrifice” (Jaya. p-1). It starts with the snake sacrifice done by Janamejayawho is the grandson of Abhimanyu (Son of Arjuna). It is during this sacrifice, Astikaretold Janamejaya the Mahabharata, from the stories of their ancestors to Bharata, Shantanu, Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and then to the Pandavas and Kauravas explaining the reason behind each and every part of the story. The prologue has been beautifully designed by using the question and answer methods, which makes it easier for the readers. The prologue ends with a remark by Astika:

‘Listen to the tale carefully, Janamejaya’, Astika whispered in the king’s ear, ‘Do not be distracted by the plots. Within the maze of stories flows the river of wisdom. That is your true inheritance.’ (Jaya, p-7)

The first chapter titled as “Ancestors” deals with seven sections: 1. Chandra’s Son. 2. A wife for Budh. 3. Pururava’s obsession. 4. Shakuntala’s innocence. 5. Bharata’s heir. 6. Yayati’s demand. 7. Madhavi’s forgiveness. These sections gradually talks about the mistakes that occurred again and again in the family resulting into something havoc. Devdutt furnishes these chapters with a story telling attempt which makes it more engaging. In the very beginning of the chapters, Devdutt almost clarifies the motif of the chapter. He illustrates the first chapter “Ancestors” by quoting Janamejaya, what happened before repeated itself again and again in your family history(Jaya. p- 9). The section (Chandra’s Son) talks about the birth of Budh, lord of planet Mercury, a shape- shifting liminal being, neither male nor female(Jaya. p-12) and how he despite being biologically Chandra’s Son was still raised in the house of Brihaspati. The next section (A wife for Budh) narrates the story of a spell casted by Lord Shiva into a forest to consort, Shakti, who did not want any male, animal or human to disturb her when she was in the company of her lord (Jaya. p-14). A prince called Sudyumna, son of Manu, the first kings of humans, falls into the situation and realises that he has lost his manhood. On pleading before the goddess his spell gets modified which says that you can only be a woman when the moon wanes and a man when the moon waxes(Jaya. p- 14). Later on Budh and Ila both got married and were called as Chandra- vamsis, descendants of the moon (Jaya. p- 14). The third section (Pururava’s obsession) tells about the mistake that resulted into something very grieving. Pururava, a chandra- vamsi(Jaya. p- 15) became a mad king after his beloved Urvashi left him and returned to Amravati. Pururava couldn’t keep his promise which resulted into his downfall. The fourth section (Shakuntala’s innocence) reminds us about the story of innocent Shakuntala and her husband Dushyanta, and how a woman was doomed by her husband for no reason. Dushyanta on realising his mistake declares Shakuntala his queen and Bharata his heir (Jaya. p- 19). The fifth section (Bharata’s heir) talks about the story of how Vitatha became Bharata’s heir. The Devas at the end of yagna, blessed Bharata a son called Vitatha (Brihaspati and Mamata’s rejected child)(Jaya. p- 20) who grew up to be an extremely skilled ruler and was crowned as a king by Bharata himself. The sixth section (Yayati’s demand) talks about a father Yayati, a Chandra- vamsi and his mistakes that sowed the seeds of the war that took place in Kuru-kshetra. The last section of this Chapter (Madhavi’s forgiveness) reminds us about how a daughter, Madhavi (Yayati’s daughter) requests her four sons to pass on some portions of their merit to Yayati (their grandfather). The story teaches the society, the value of forgiveness.

Counting on one’s point of view, a story, an image, or a custom can be spiritual or irreligious. If one considers that only rational ideas are real then religious ideas are compelled to be fabled, because the theory of godliness and by extension divinity defies logic- the sacred comes from the realm of faith, not reason, and from myths, not logos (Indian Mythology.p-10). A good example of faith-based action would be the fact that all Hindus worship Ganesha at the start of any sacred activity. To the devotees, Ganeshais a perfect symbol of unstoppable power (elephant head), abundance (rotund body and potbelly) and safekeeping (the rat, which is a pest, has been domesticated and turned into vehicle). This detailed and emotional belief is seen as the first step in manifestation and fulfilment of the devotee’s intention. A believer

will always regard this whole story as both real and rational proving these very facts with an acute logic. The world in which the scientists and the believer live is dominated by the Hegelian maxim -all that is rational is actual, and all that is actual is rational (Indian Mythology. p- 10).

The book **Jaya** has 18- chapters in total. And each of the chapters shares sections that are connected to one another. The second chapter “Parents” basically speaks about the family clan that suffered for the selfish causes of a father (Mahabhishta). The third chapter “Birth” speaks about how in Janamejaya’s family the unfertile or impotent men bred heirs by asking gods to make love with their wives. The fourth “Education” teach us about the greedy approaches of the ancestors, who for their benefits, turned teachers into a trader and priests into warriors. The fifth “Castaway” tell us the story of how Rakshasas, Nagas and Gandharavas backed Janamejaya’s family to survive. The sixth “Marriage” narrates the story of how a mother treated another woman as a commodity and suggested their Sons to share their wife. The seventh chapter “Friendship” narrates the story of Lord Krishna’s sacrifice. This portion tells us the reason behind Lord Krishna’s marrying Satyabhama (his second wife) in order to secure his position in the Yadava council. The eighth “Division” paints the story of burning Khandava- prastha to establish a city Indra-prastha (the city of Indra). The ninth “Coronation” recites the story of Yudhishtira’s coronation. It tells us the story about devastated mishap that happened between Krishna and Shisupala before the great coronation ceremony. The tenth “Gambling” narrates the story of a game that was played between “Pandavas and Kauravas”. A game of dice, played for pleasure, ruined a city and it also marked the most dreadful sin where a wife was gambled away as a property. The eleventh “Exile” narrates the story of Pandavas who gambled away their kingdom, had to live in a forest and face the humiliations. The twelfth “Hiding” speaks about the aftereffects of one’s awful deeds. The thirteenth “Gathering” narrates the thoughts that arose during the famous battle at Kuru- kshetra. The thoughts that appeared during the battle pulled them back. The fourteenth “Perspective” speaks about how only Arjuna apprehended the goal of life and understood the meaning of it. The fifteenth “War” conveys the story of the battle that was fought. The battle literally followed lusty massacres. The bloodbath quenched the thirst of the earth- goddess and restored the earth’s splendour. The sixteenth “Aftermath” directs the loss that battles bring about. The innocents that are left, be at disadvantage. The seventeenth “Reconstruction” depicts the idea behind these fights. The chapter talks about how this lesson has to be passed on to the living so that which is lost can be restored. The eighteenth “Renunciation” teach us the very truth that a man should always keep in mind, the lesson that we experience every day is never permanent and the idea of acquiring knowledge is always a work in progress.

The book ends with an “Epilogue: The End of the Snake Sacrifice” (Jaya. p- 339). Janamejaya is seen asking questions about- Who is the hero of this tale? Who is the villain? (Jaya. p- 341). In answer to these questions, the storyteller- sage speaks about the ending which is the actual reason for the title of the book Jaya by Vyasa. The story ended not just with the victory of the Pandavas over the Kauravas but with Yudhisitra’s triumph over himself, his spiritual victory or Jaya. The book beautifully serves the purpose of the title by clearing the very truth that Vijaya is material victory, where there is a loser. Jayais spiritual victory, where there are no losers (Jaya. p- 341). Each section ends with an understanding where the writer is sharing his modern approaches in context to the events that took place in the bygone period. On reading this point of views, one can easily say that all the episodes serve as a mirror for the

humankind. Every story talks about a lesson that if kept in mind, could have stopped the war easily. Every episode in the Mahabharata conveyed the purpose of life- that is to grow materially, intellectually and emotionally. Unfortunately, the Kauravas focus only on material growth. By embracing Krishna, the Pandavas are offered intellectual and emotional growth, that has the power to help them break their own self- imposed limitations (Jaya. p- 240).

Now, the purpose of my paper is clearly to emphasize on “The Idea Called Dharma”, which is also the last chapter of the book. Devdutt explains Dharma with a diagram where he illustrates the law of jungle that enhances the animals to continue and work for their survival. For an individual, Dharma stands for “cosmic law and order”. It teaches a human to follow the duties in different stages of life with an unadulterated mind and soul. The writer speaks about the humans who can choose to accept, exploit or reject the law of Dharma (Jaya. p- 346). Now, the question that comes up is- Isn't it our Dharma to study our own religion? Shouldn't it be our responsibility to stop questioning on every ancient narrative? Believers tend to look upon such rational exercises with distrust. The world has changed in the past fifty years, especially with postmodernism doubting and questioning the very basis, has become a custom these days. Different cultures accept the world differently. Each one of them apprehends its understandings from one generation to another through narratives, symbols, rituals and practices. Every religion reflects their true shelves and sings a different tune. For example, the red clothes worn by Hindu brides are associated with “scarlet women” in Christianity. Then, the goat, the symbol of virility, is sacrificed to the Hindu Goddess, is the symbol of the devil in the biblical sources.

Myth can be described in two different ways- 1. It is a sacred idea or belief that is passed down over generations, 2. It is illogical, absurd, irrational and fantastic concepts about the world that generates a cynicism to unsophisticated minds. But ironically, the two meaning are absolutely juxtaposing each other. One can take these stories, symbols, images as sacred or stupid. If one believes that only rational ideas are real and logical, then sacred ideas are bound to be unreal and irrational. Science or logic can't be a solution to these beliefs. No scientist can ever explain why a river is holy or ritual hallowed (Indian Mythology. p- 10). Myth generates a traditional culture- specific understanding of the world. Science search for a universal understanding of the world. Myth needs faith, not proof (Indian Mythology. p- 11). Dharma is not about winning. It is about empathy and growth (Jaya. p-309). The quest for knowledge is Dharma, and to explore your inner self; one has to communicate. It is a special kind of communication that constitutes a relationship between the universe, society and humans. Society tends to remark these religious practices with distrust. It has to be accepted that science by its nature is disrespectful and provokes violation in every single way. It encourages slaughtering of ideas through curiosity and question. To find one's most sacred beliefs and faith being scrutinized by “logical and reasonable” minds can be sacrilegious sometime. To cope with the reality, impersonality and ambivalence of nature, people turn to myth. Through mythmaking impersonal events have moral or ethical reasons and the faceless environment comes to have a personality (Indian Mythology. p- 57). It is a fact that nature is the ultimate reality and we can never escape nature. We are absolutely powerless in front of nature. Before nature's dominant capacity to sustain and destroy us, we are reduced to a state of sinking and humiliating passivity.

Revisiting history and mythology or reviving orality has been observed as a key trend among Indian scholars and authors. Re- presentation, re- interpretation and re-

creation of historical and mythological episodes or characters can be seen on the works of several Indian authors. Human life is not governed by logic. Emotions that drive humanity – love, hate, fear, greed, ambition – cannot be rationalised. Human beings therefore cannot make sense of life through scientific, evidence-based discourses. For the sake of survival and sanity, they need to believe in a frame of reference. They need myth. And myth needs mythology. Kali Yuga refers to a time when man lacks the spirit of generosity (Jaya. p- 322). We fear that the logical minds will convince the younger generations that ancient passed down beliefs are nothing but mere imaginations, and that God is solely a concocted hypothesis. We fear that these generation if convinced, will atrociously throw away the history that has reconstructed us with the past reality of India. Subjectivity is dispute in a world that desires objectivity. The power of myth is that, it is a game changer. It grants you to enjoy your truth and other people's truth and move towards greater discovery.

Let us all have faith. Let us all be at peace- with ourselves, our worlds, and all the rest there is (Jaya. p- 343).

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