



"Myth=Mythya: A Global Study Of Hindu Vedic Legacy"

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Abstract: This paper explores the new dimensions of mythology aiming at the globalization of Vedic legacy as depicted in Devdutt Pattanaik's Myth = Mithya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology. It illustrates the resistance of power dynamics by celebrating the mythology of colonized nation like India. Pattanaik makes ancient stories relevant to a wide range of readers by utilizing approachable language, comparative mythology, and modern interpretations. It explores how he navigates the complexities of presenting culturally specific concepts to a global audience, balancing authenticity with the need for broader understanding. The paper argues that Pattanaik's approach facilitates a dialogue between cultures, fostering appreciation for Vedic traditions while also acknowledging the potential for misinterpretation or appropriation. By examining specific examples from Myth = Mithya, this research aims to understand how Pattanaik's work contributes to the globalization of Vedic legacy, shaping contemporary understandings of Hindu mythology and its place in the world.

Index Terms - Vedic legacy, globalization, mythology, Devdutt Pattanaik, Myth = Mithya, cultural dialogue.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mythology, in its various forms, plays a crucial role in shaping the beliefs, practices, and cultural identities of societies around the world. It acts as a lens through which we view the human experience, offering answers to existential questions and shaping social norms. One of the most profound mythological traditions in the world is Hindu mythology, a rich tapestry woven from centuries of cultural and spiritual narratives. At the heart of these myths lie the ancient Vedic texts, which form the foundation of Hindu philosophy, cosmology, and spiritual practice. The Vedic tradition forms the bedrock of Hindu thought, offering not only a rich mythology but also an intricate system of philosophy, ritual, and cosmology. The term "Vedic" refers to the body of sacred texts known as the Vedas, which were composed over a vast period of time, beginning around 1500 BCE in the Indian subcontinent. The Vedas include four primary collections: the Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda, and Atharvaveda. These texts are considered the foundational scriptures of Hinduism, and they are largely focused on hymns, prayers, rituals, and philosophical discourses. The mythology of the Vedas involves a vast pantheon of gods, each representing different aspects of the natural world and human existence. These gods were not seen as personal figures but as representations of natural forces that governed the world. Rig Veda 1.3.1 "I have drunk Soma, I have seen the gods, I have passed through the firmament and reached the place of immortality." (Jones, William. The Rig Veda) It refers to

the ritual consumption of Soma, a sacred drink that grants divine insight and transcendence, central to many Vedic rituals.

The status of the Hindu legacy during British colonial rule in India was complex and multifaceted. The British colonization of India, which began in the mid-18th century and continued until 1947, had significant effects on Hindu society, religion, culture, and identity. Several aspects of Hindu life were impacted, both negatively and positively, through colonial policies, social reforms, and the influence of British intellectuals and administrators. British colonial rulers and scholars often viewed Indian society, including its Hindu traditions, through the lens of Orientalism—a framework that portrayed Eastern cultures as exotic, primitive, and irrational, compared to the "rational" and "civilized" West. This led to distorted representations of Hinduism and its practices, often highlighting aspects like caste, superstition, and idol worship while downplaying the philosophical and spiritual richness of Hindu thought. Christian missionaries played a significant role in critiquing Hinduism during British colonial rule, often framing it as a "pagan" and "idolatrous" religion. The missionaries attempted to convert Indians to Christianity and in doing so, challenged Hindu practices and beliefs, portraying them as outdated and regressive. Further, the British introduced a Western-style education system, which was largely based on European models of learning, literature, and science. While this opened up new opportunities for education, it also led to the marginalization of traditional Indian knowledge systems, such as Sanskrit and indigenous sciences. Many young Hindus were educated in British schools, where they learned about Western rationalism and Christianity, but often had little exposure to the depth of their own cultural and religious traditions. The shift towards Western education often led to a diminishing sense of pride in traditional Indian cultural practices and knowledge systems. Many educated Indians began to see their own traditions as backward or primitive, further distancing themselves from their heritage. This cultural alienation contributed to the creation of a divide between traditional Indian wisdom and the Western worldview, which in turn affected the development of a national identity in the years leading up to Indian independence. But our Vedic legacy couldn't be wiped out completely as paradoxically some British scholars like Sir William Jones (1746–1794), a British philologist and judge in India, is often credited with being one of the first Western scholars to recognize the significance of Sanskrit. One of Jones's most important contributions was his theory of the Indo-European language family, which posited that Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and other European languages shared a common ancestry. This discovery connected the study of Sanskrit to a broader linguistic context, drawing attention to the rich intellectual tradition of ancient India. Müller's most notable contribution was his extensive translation of the Rigveda and other Vedic texts, as well as his work on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. His translations made these ancient scriptures accessible to the Western world, and his scholarly publications introduced the complexity and depth of Hindu philosophy and cosmology to a broader audience. By systematically translating and analysing these texts, Müller gave the world access to key aspects of the Vedic tradition, which had previously been largely inaccessible to non-Sanskrit speakers. However, this scholarly interest was often limited to academic study and was not always sympathetic to the living traditions of Hinduism as even their works were shaped by colonial power dynamics and often reflected Western interpretations of Eastern traditions.

Devdutt Pattanaik through the novel *Myth = Mythya: A Handbook of Hindu Mythology* presents a novel approach to understanding the myths of the Hindu tradition. Pattanaik believes that myths are not simply ancient stories but symbolic representations that offer timeless insights into human nature, society, and the cosmos. *Myth = Mythya* attempts to bridge the gap between traditional Hindu mythology and modern understandings of history, culture, and philosophy. Pattanaik contends that the distinction between myth and history is not as rigid as it is often made to appear in Western discourse. In Western discourse, myth and history are often considered separate realms—myth being a collection of imaginative stories or symbolic truths, while history is seen as a factual, chronological account of events. However, Pattanaik argues that in many Eastern traditions, particularly within Hinduism, these two are more fluidly intertwined. In his works, Pattanaik suggests that myths and historical events are not always separate categories but often coexist or overlap in ways that serve different purposes within cultural understanding. Myths may be grounded in historical events, but they also transcend the purely factual to express deeper truths about human nature, societal values, and cosmic order. They are not merely allegories but can contain layers of meaning that resonate with people across generations. By examining myths through a symbolic lens, Pattanaik challenges the reader to see them not just as stories of gods and demons, but as allegories for deeper truths about the world we inhabit. His work encourages us to move beyond the binary opposition of myth versus reality and embrace a more fluid and expansive view of knowledge. Devdutt Pattanaik's interpretation of the Vedic legacy seeks to reinterpret and reintegrate these myths into modern-day discussions. He emphasizes the idea that Vedic deities are symbolic, transcendent forces rather than anthropomorphic figures. For instance, the Vedic god Indra is often associated with thunder and rain, but Pattanaik suggests that he symbolizes the tension between order and chaos, much like other mythological figures who embody cosmic principles. This paper aims to explore the global significance of Pattanaik's *Myth = Mythya*, focusing on how it contributes to the understanding of Hindu Vedic mythology in a global context. By examining Pattanaik's reinterpretation of Hindu myths, this paper will discuss the ways in which Hindu mythology has transcended its cultural roots in India and impacted global thought. Additionally, it will explore the broader implications of Pattanaik's work for understanding the role of mythology in a globalized world.

Devdutt Pattanaik's *Myth = Mythya* offers an insightful and accessible interpretation of Hindu mythology, presenting it not merely as a collection of ancient stories but as a reflection of eternal truths that transcend time and geography. Pattanaik's central philosophy is that the boundary between myth and history is not as distinct as traditionally believed. While Western thought often treats myths as unscientific or fanciful tales, Pattanaik argues that Hindu myths—rooted in the Vedic tradition—serve as potent allegories that encode profound philosophical ideas about existence, morality, and the cosmos. In his work, Pattanaik seeks to highlight the flexibility of myth and its ability to evolve across different epochs, regions, and communities. He introduces the concept of *Mythya*—a Sanskrit term derived from *Mithya*—meaning "illusion" or "unreality." This term challenges the notion that myths are fixed, historical events, positioning them instead as fluid, symbolic representations of human understanding. Pattanaik asserts that myths should

not be confined to their historical origins; rather, they serve as a medium to explore deeper layers of human experience. In *Myth = Mythya*, he argues that the understanding of myths should be dynamic, considering that they adapt and transform across generations while still retaining their core messages. Through the lens of Pattanaik's interpretation, myths like those found in the Vedic tradition and Hindu epics (such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana) are not mere tales of gods and heroes. They are symbolic narratives that speak to universal human conditions such as love, conflict, desire, and the quest for truth. The Story of the Ramayana and the Concept of Dharma, highlights that the narrative of Rama's exile and the battle with Ravana is not just a historical event but a mythological tale that conveys deeper philosophical teachings about dharma (duty, morality). According to Pattanaik, the story of Rama is a guide to understanding how one should live, deal with conflicts, and uphold moral values in a complex world. The myth transcends the specific historical context and instead provides a framework for exploring concepts such as justice, loyalty, and righteousness. Pattanaik argues that the Ramayana should not merely be seen as a historical or literal event, but as a reflection of the human condition, offering lessons on ethical choices that are relevant for all times.

In *The Mahabharata*, Pattanaik delves into the deeper meanings of the battle of Kurukshetra. He asserts that the epic is not just a historical account of a war but a *mythya* that explores the nature of human conflict, the complexities of power, and the ambiguous nature of good and evil. The characters, such as Arjuna, Krishna, and Duryodhana, represent different facets of human psychology, and the war is a metaphor for the internal struggles that individuals face in their lives. For example, Arjuna's inner conflict on the battlefield, when he hesitates to fight, is a mythological exploration of the human dilemma between duty and personal desire. Pattanaik emphasizes that the Mahabharata goes beyond a historical recounting of war, serving as a tool to explore moral ambiguities and the consequences of human action.

Pattanaik's analysis of creation myths, such as those found in the Rigveda or in the stories of Vishnu's avatars, underscores that myths serve as metaphors for understanding the nature of existence, creation, and the cyclical nature of time. In Hindu cosmology, creation is often seen as a continuous process of destruction and renewal, symbolized through various gods and avatars. Pattanaik points out that these myths should not be seen as simply historical or literal events, but as allegories for understanding the cyclical nature of life and death, and the cosmic order of the universe. The myth of Vishnu's ten avatars (*Dashavatara*), for instance, symbolizes the ongoing evolution of life and the adaptability of the divine to human needs and conditions. The myth is not bound by historical time but reflects eternal truths. Similarly, the Myth of Shiva and Parvati symbolizes the balance between the Divine Masculine and Feminine. In his exploration of the relationship between Shiva and Parvati, Pattanaik shows how their myth goes beyond a personal love story. Instead, it is a symbolic representation of the balance between the masculine and feminine principles in the universe. Shiva represents the ascetic, detached aspect of divinity, while Parvati embodies the nurturing, worldly side. Pattanaik emphasizes that this myth is not merely about the historical or mythological figures of Shiva and Parvati but is a metaphorical exploration of the dynamic interplay between different forces in the cosmos and within the human experience—such as detachment versus engagement, destruction versus creation, and chaos versus order. These myths invite contemplation on the essential dualities that define existence. The novel also explores the myth of Ganesha's birth and the

subsequent removal of his head by Shiva. Ganesha's story is often reduced to a tale about how he got his elephant head, but Pattanaik argues that it symbolizes much more. The story is a myth about overcoming obstacles, not just physical but also internal challenges—ignorance, pride, and attachment. Ganesha is seen as a remover of obstacles, and his image and narrative serve as a guide to understanding the importance of resilience, wisdom, and perseverance. The myth's relevance lies in its ability to transcend historical origin and offer a spiritual and psychological blueprint for individuals to navigate challenges in life.

In all of these examples, Pattanaik contends that myths are more than mere stories rooted in historical events or fixed origins. They serve as a medium for exploring universal aspects of human experience, offering insights into our psychological, ethical, and spiritual lives. By viewing myths through this lens, we can access layers of meaning that are not confined to the past but remain relevant for contemporary and future generations. These myths are not just historical records but vehicles for exploring deeper human truths—what Pattanaik calls *mythya*.

Hindu Mythology has quite a significant global impact while Hinduism's Vedic roots are deeply embedded in Indian culture, its mythology has had a profound and lasting impact on global thought, especially as India's cultural footprint spread across the globe through trade, colonialism, migration, and, more recently, media and the Internet. Hindu mythology has found resonance in a variety of global contexts, shaping everything from Western literature and philosophy to modern popular culture. One of the most significant ways Hindu mythology has gained global recognition is through its portrayal in literature. From the 18th century onwards, Western scholars, missionaries, and explorers began to engage with the texts of Hinduism, leading to a greater interest in its myths. The works of authors such as Hermann Hesse (*Siddhartha*), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, and modern writers like Wendy Doniger (*The Hindus: An Alternative History*) have sought to explore the implications of Hindu mythology on personal spirituality and cultural identity. Wendy Doniger's *The Hindus: An Alternative History* offers a comprehensive and nuanced examination of Hindu mythology, highlighting its complexity, diversity, and evolution over time. Doniger presents Hindu mythology as a rich tapestry of stories that reflect a broad spectrum of beliefs, practices, and cultural expressions across different periods of Indian history. In her work, Doniger challenges the traditional, often monolithic portrayals of Hinduism by showing how mythology has evolved and transformed through various interpretations, regional variations, and historical contexts. She emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of the Hindu tradition, presenting myths not as fixed or singular truths but as stories that reflect changing social, political, and philosophical realities. Doniger explores how these myths often contain multiple layers of meaning, offering both moral lessons and metaphysical insights into life, death, the divine, and the human experience. Furthermore, Doniger discusses the tension between Hindu mythology's spiritual and intellectual dimensions, highlighting how different aspects of the myths—such as gods, rituals, and philosophical ideas—have interacted with historical events and societal changes. She also pays close attention to the themes of gender, power, and social hierarchy in these myths, revealing how mythological stories have been used to reinforce or challenge societal norms. The popularity of Hindu mythology in Western culture has also been facilitated by the global interest in yoga, meditation, and Eastern spirituality. In *A Passage to India*, Forster introduces Hindu philosophical concepts, especially through Professor Godbole, who reflects a more spiritual worldview, in contrast to the more rational and

practical outlook of the British characters. Godbole's view of the universe and life echoes Hindu teachings on karma, the impermanence of life, interconnectedness and the idea of surrender to the divine order, reflecting the spiritual complexity of India in the novel- "We are all in the same boat, we are all in the same world." (Forster. A Passage to India) In this Dr. Aziz, hints at a Hindu concept of interconnectedness — that all beings are part of a larger, interconnected whole. This idea aligns with the Hindu understanding of the world as a network of relationships, all part of the same universal truth. In Hesse, Hermann's Siddhartha, the concept of journey towards enlightenment, "When someone is seeking, it happens quite easily that his eyes and ears are closed."⁴ In this line, the philosophical evolution and the quest for wisdom and inner peace, highlighting themes of self-realization, spiritual awakening, and the interconnectedness of all life is shown.

Concepts from Hindu mythology, such as karma, dharma, and moksha, have become integral to modern self-help movements and wellness trends, leading to a cultural exchange between the East and West. In particular, the figure of Krishna from the Bhagavad Gita has gained prominence in both religious and secular contexts, offering moral and philosophical guidance to individuals worldwide. Pattanaik examines Krishna's discourse in the Bhagavad Gita, focusing on the philosophical teachings about duty (dharma), action (karma), and morality. These concepts are central to Hindu mythology and have had a profound impact on various global leaders, thinkers, and spiritual figures. The idea of performing one's duty without attachment to the results, for example, resonates deeply in a world where individuals often struggle with finding balance between personal aspirations and societal obligations.

The teachings of Krishna, particularly the emphasis on selfless action and leadership rooted in ethical principles, have been embraced by modern leaders. For instance, figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. drew from the Gita to guide their own actions and leadership in the face of oppression and social unrest. Gandhi famously applied the principle of nonviolent action (Ahimsa) derived from Krishna's teachings as the basis for his struggle for India's independence. The conflict between Arjuna and Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita serves as an allegory for internal struggles, making it highly relatable in the context of modern psychological issues. Arjuna's emotional and ethical dilemma—whether to fight in the battle or abandon the war—mirrors the inner turmoil that many individuals face when confronted with difficult decisions. Pattanaik's exploration of this dilemma sheds light on how the Gita can offer guidance for resolving modern existential crises. The Gita's philosophy of karma by acting without attachment to the results—has widespread relevance in today's world. Pattanaik shows how this principle encourages individuals to focus on the present moment and their responsibilities, without becoming overwhelmed by the outcomes. This is particularly significant in a modern context where people often feel overwhelmed by the pursuit of success and fear of failure. The Gita's teaching on karma allows for a more balanced approach to action and its consequences. Pattanaik suggests that the Bhagavad Gita, with its universal themes of moral dilemmas, selfless action, and spiritual growth, has transcended the boundaries of Hinduism to become a source of inspiration and guidance for people around the world, regardless of their cultural or religious backgrounds. Spiritual and political leaders, as well as intellectuals, have drawn on its teachings to address a variety of contemporary issues whether related to personal well-being, social justice, or

leadership. By weaving contemporary issues with ancient myths, Pattanaik shows how the messages of the Bhagavad Gita remain relevant, applicable, and accessible even in modern times.

Hindu mythology's influence extends into the world of cinema, particularly Hollywood. Movies such as The Matrix trilogy and Avatar incorporate elements of Hindu thought, from the concept of the cyclical nature of time to the idea of universal interconnectedness. Additionally, the global proliferation of Indian cinema (Bollywood) has introduced mythological themes and Hindu epics to international audiences. Hindu mythology has indeed had a significant impact on global popular culture, particularly in cinema. Hollywood films, such as The Matrix trilogy and Avatar, have incorporated key elements of Hindu thought, reflecting the enduring relevance of these ancient teachings. In The Matrix Trilogy, The Cyclical Nature of Time (Kalachakra) is shown. The concept of time in Hindu cosmology is cyclical, with recurring cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction, symbolized by the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. In The Matrix, the idea of time being cyclical is explored through the constant "rebooting" of the Matrix, where the same events seem to repeat with slight variations, leading to an ongoing cycle of destruction and renewal. This mirrors the Hindu idea of Kalachakra, the wheel of time, where life, death, and rebirth occur in an infinite loop. The concept of Maya (illusion) is central to Hindu philosophy, which suggests that the material world is an illusion and that true reality lies beyond what we perceive with our senses. In The Matrix, the characters live in a simulated world created by intelligent machines, which can be seen as an allegory for Maya. Neo's journey to awaken from the illusion and discover his true purpose mirrors the spiritual quest in Hinduism to realize the true nature of reality beyond illusion. As the character Morpheus describes, "The Matrix is a system, Neo. That system is our enemy. But when you're inside, you look around, what do you see? Businessmen, teachers, lawyers, carpenters. The very minds of the people we are trying to save. But until we do, these people are still a part of that system and that makes them our enemy." (The Matrix. Warner Bros). It parallels the spiritual path of an individual seeking moksha- liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara). Neo's transformation into "The One" is symbolic of the Hindu concept of a soul's awakening to its true divine nature, overcoming ignorance and ultimately attaining liberation. Movie Avatar explores the interconnectedness of all living beings, particularly through the relationship between the indigenous Na'vi people and their environment on the planet Pandora. This idea of interconnectedness mirrors the Hindu concept of Brahman, the ultimate, all-encompassing reality. In Hindu thought, all living beings and elements of the universe are connected through Brahman, and the idea that the Na'vi are deeply connected to the natural world and the "Mother Tree" evokes the sacredness of nature and the divine presence in all things in Hinduism. The concept of samsara, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, is portrayed in Avatar through the central character, Jake Sully. Jake's soul enters the body of an avatar, experiencing a new life in the form of a Na'vi. This reincarnation-like process is analogous to the Hindu understanding of the soul's journey through different bodies across lifetimes. The idea of a soul living multiple lives is closely related to Hindu beliefs about reincarnation and the ongoing cycle of existence. Jake Sully's transformation throughout the film can be interpreted as a form of spiritual awakening. As he learns to live with the Na'vi and connects with their sacred beliefs, he comes to understand his duty (dharma) to protect the natural world. The notion of dharma, or living in harmony with the universe, is central to Hindu philosophy, and Jake's journey to understand his role within the larger cosmic order

reflects this principle. As Jake says, "I was a warrior who was brought back from the dead. I was given a second chance to live, to be a part of something bigger than myself." (Avatar. James Cameron). This is Jake's reflection on his transformation and the new life/Avatar. Both *The Matrix* and *Avatar* draw heavily on themes from Hindu mythology and philosophy, such as the cyclical nature of time, illusion, the interconnectedness of life, reincarnation, and the search for spiritual truth. These concepts, which are deeply embedded in the Hindu worldview, have found expression in popular culture, allowing audiences worldwide to engage with Hindu thought in new and accessible ways.

The comparative study of Hindu mythology with other global mythological traditions—such as those of ancient Greece, Egypt, and Norse mythology—reveals both similarities and distinctive features and further establishes its wider reach. While each mythological system is rooted in its unique cultural and geographical context, common themes emerge that suggest shared human concerns and universal motifs. For example, in Greek mythology, gods like Zeus and Hera rule over human affairs in ways that are reminiscent of the Vedic deities such as Indra and Saraswati. Both traditions depict the gods as engaged in human-like struggles—whether personal rivalries or wars that affect the human realm. Additionally, the idea of a divine law or cosmic order, central to Hindu mythology through Dharma and Rta, finds a parallel in the Greek concept of Logos, or divine reason, which is responsible for maintaining the balance of the universe. In Norse mythology, the cyclical concept of time is also present, most notably in the idea of Ragnarok, a prophesied end of the world followed by its rebirth. Similarly, Hindu mythology speaks of the cycles of creation, preservation, and destruction through the stories of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, which reinforce the idea of Kalachakra (the wheel of time). In Egyptian mythology, the concept of life after death and the journey of the soul is explored in a manner similar to Hindu beliefs in reincarnation and the soul's journey through various lifetimes. The Egyptian god Osiris, associated with life, death, and resurrection, bears similarities to the Hindu god Shiva, who embodies destruction and regeneration in the cosmic cycle.

Despite these similarities, Hindu mythology stands apart in several ways, particularly in its concept of the atman (soul) and the eternal nature of the self, which is distinct from the focus on gods and the afterlife in many other mythological traditions. Hindu mythology's portrayal of deities as symbols of cosmic principles, rather than as characters in a divine drama, also distinguishes it from Western religious traditions, where gods often act as personal figures with human-like attributes. The work of Devdutt Pattanaik in *Myth = Mythya* offers a refreshing and insightful perspective on Hindu mythology. His exploration of the fluidity of myths as symbolic representations of universal truths challenges traditional conceptions of myth as merely ancient stories. Through his reinterpretation, Pattanaik provides a pathway for global audiences to engage with the rich Vedic legacy and the wisdom embedded in Hindu mythology. Hindu mythology's impact on global culture is immense, influencing everything from literature and philosophy to art and media. By comparing Hindu mythology to other mythological traditions, we gain a deeper appreciation for the shared human experience reflected in these ancient stories while recognizing the unique contributions of Hindu thought. In a globalized world, mythology plays an essential role in maintaining cultural continuity, fostering cross-cultural dialogue, and offering universal insights into the human condition. Through its adaptation to modern contexts and its ability to address shared themes, mythology continues to be a valuable tool for understanding the complexities of the globalized world. Its

universal appeal, combined with its capacity to evolve, ensures that it will remain relevant for future generations, providing wisdom, moral guidance, and a sense of connection to both past and present. In the end, Pattanaik’s work exemplifies the timeless nature of myth and its continued relevance in the modern world.

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