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Revitalizing Indigenous Culture: A Study of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*

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Abstract:

The 21st century Indian fictional landscape has witnessed a significant swing in almost all spheres of life. Originally, it is going towards a generational change. Ultimately we have left our borrowed colonial attire far behind and want to read and write more about our own roots, shadows and cultural twigs. Inception of culture has been frequent in literature from the time immemorial to connote the past. But for the past couple of years this practice has been experimented in abundance by the young generation of Indian writing in English who has attracted the attention of the busy 4-G Indian readers.

The phenomenal success of Amish's *Shiva Trilogy* is a milestone in the history of Indian publishing industry. He has contributed a lot in popularizing and invigorating Indian culture and history amongst young Indian readers who had almost forgotten their rich ancient culture and craving for the western one.

The paper aims at exploring Amish's point of view on this age-old practice of delineating local culture under the scanner of archetypal theory in a larger context and his contribution to Indian Writing in English. Moreover, it comprises a dissectual study of Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* with reference to his practice of revitalizing Indian culture and history. By attributing scientific explanations to the conventional cultural ethics, Amish has recast the indigenous Indian culture with a refreshing perspective which has definitely revived the rich tradition of Indian 'heroic age' and revolutionized the Indian Writing in English in order to acquaint the Indian readers with ancient Indian culture and history.

Keywords: Myth, history, culture, karma, epic, the Neelkanth.

The 21st century Indian fictional scenario is marked with a significant shift in almost all spheres of life. Originally, it is going towards a generational change. Ultimately we have left our borrowed colonial attire far behind and want to read and write more about our own roots and shadows. Myth and history have been used in literature from the time immemorial as means of expressing past. But for the past couple of years this practice has been experimented in abundance by the young generation of Indian writing in English. Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Krishna Udayashankar and Ashwin Sanghi are well known names in this direction. They have produced a unique type of literature which attracted the attention of the busy 4-G Indian readers.

The word “culture” includes language, ideals, ethnicity, religion, nationality as well as displacement, re-location and hybridization. In other words, it is that complex whole which involves knowledge, belief, art, moral laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Culture comprises all the traits acquired by man from his group by both conscious learning and unconscious conditioning process. The individual learns the values of his society through a process of enculturation. More vividly noted Indian scholar S. Abid Husain terms:

Culture is a sense of ultimate values possessed by a particular society as expressed in its collective institutions, by its individual members in their dispositions, feelings, attitudes and manners as well as in significant forms which they give to material objects (p-3).

Indian culture can be identified as a culture based on the philosophy of Truth and Reality, Rebirth and Salvation, idea of Absolute and Spiritual Divinity. It is characterized by a typical social structure including caste system. Good and evil have always been most potent for Indian cultural identity. It has been established on Dharma that demands action or Karma irrespective of Result. Duty or Swadharma is sacrificed to attain greater good –Universal Dharma which distinguishes Indian culture from the Western one.

India has a rich culture and unique identity with *vasudheiv kutumbhkama* (universal family) and *athithi devobhava* (guest is god). It is equally pertinent to mention that for the average Indian the idea of India and his or her own identity is inseparably intermingled with mythic memories that are deeply rooted in Indian consciousness constantly reinforced by narratives in the epics. Though more than 80 percent of Indians may be Hindu, the country has a very large Muslim Population and a great many followers of other faiths: Christians, Sikhs, Jains, Parsees and others. The tradition of heterodoxy and inclusiveness has enabled a lot to flourish democracy and secularism in India. Meanwhile it also creates a curiosity that who should be given a primary status in Indian culture as there are many faiths in India? The political minded Hindu activists dwell on the view that they are the real representatives of Indian culture and identity. The argument for this seems to draw on two facts as Amartya Sen says:

- (1)The statistical fact that the Hindus form an overwhelming majority of Indians (no other community comes anywhere close to it numerically), and
- (2)The historical and cultural fact that the Hindu traditions goes back more than three thousand years in Indian history (at least to the Vedas) and that nearly every part of the Indian culture bears the historical imprint of Hindu thoughts and practices.(Amartya Sen, 53)

Samuel Huntington also firmly places India in the category of ‘the Hindu civilization.’ This perspective has to downplay the fact that India has many more Muslims than any other country in the world with the exception of Indonesia and, marginally Pakistan. But at the same time the

ancientness of the Hindu tradition and culture cannot be denied and this ancientness is enormously accountable for prosperous Indian cultural identity.

The religious temperament of Indian mind irrespective of any faith has been engrossed in seeking an analysis of the world through a sense of perception and interpretation. Indians claim of having experience of values, of the world of spirit. They speak of darshana, seeing, vision, when the soul is scanned by a Being that is more powerful than itself. Equally it can be said that we have one major source of knowledge which is based on moral obligation and spiritual reality that is experience. Because of its intrinsic strength as Pavan K. Varma says, "...the indigenous culture could not only withstand the onslaught but also absorb elements from the culture of the conquerors (p-126)". This has been a key trademark of Indian culture even up to now and religion has always been the core of the issue of identity. That is why the modern or quasi modern Indians living at home or abroad establish at least one room or place for their religious invocation including all other utmost modern facilities in their house.

The West obtained its cultural endowment from the ancient Greek and the Roman civilizations as well as from the sacred Bible. While, in the East, countries like India possessed a rich heritage of its own and survived well with its rich tradition and culture despite being under imperial rule for more than three hundred years. The grand Vedas, Shiva Purana, the Bhagvad Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have always been an inevitable source and inspiration for the common Hindus and writers in literature since the ages. Without bothering about criticisms and accusations they have been engrossed in reinterpretation of culture and history.

The basic reason for this eternal and unquenchable interest of the writers in culture is to figure out the meaning of their present in relation to their ancient past. This common practice of reinterpreting cultural traits involves reconstruction of mythical stories and characters in accordance with the context. For instance, when the Marxist movement entered the academic arena, the classical texts in literature were revisited, to reinterpret them from the Marxist perspective. Similarly, the feminist movement gave its colour to the literary product with all its attribution of feminist interpretations to the mythical stories; enriched it with its contextual meaning. The literary personas representing traditional values are perceived as cultural heroes of the nation. Through these mythical characters the philosophical ideas like the mysteries of birth, rebirth, death, karma and destiny are contemplated and propagated in the mythical stories. The imitations of such kind of mythical characters and incidents in literature, on the grounds of allegorical and literary context are known as 'archetypes.'

The tradition of Cultural delineation in Indian English fiction found concrete base in Raja Rao's works passed through a long journey till recent times. It got pinnacle heights in the hands of young generation novelists like Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker, Krishna Udayashankar and Ashwin Sanghi. Tripathi leads in this movement since he has given his own stamp to this cultural

experimentation by breaking the conventional style and giving it a modern touch. He has established the foundation of cultural description on the pyramids of Science and philosophical arguments. He has rendered the mythical characters more relatable and anticipatory, to the modern audience by imagining them in a human form with all their heroic qualities. Though Tripathy does not claim credit for this concept, he humbly acknowledges in an interview in Swarajya Magazine:

It has always existed in our culture. There are many concepts of God in the ancient Indian way. There is the nirgun niraakaar concept, called Brahman in ancient times. There is the sagun, aakar concept, where God takes a form to come closer to us. There is the avatar concept, where God is born on Earth, completes His/ Her karma and goes back. And there is the concept where a human becomes a God. I find this last concept inspiring since it means that all of us have God within us, and it's up to us to discover the God within. (Antara Das - July 11, 2015, 11:30 am)

Amish Tripathi, contextualizes Shiva Purana, a sacred Hindu text into fictional creation. While the first novel, *The Immortals of Meluha*, introduces the readers to ancient Indian culture, the second one, *The Secret of Nagas* philosophizes the concept of good and evil, which is an integral ingredient of Indian culture. The concluding novel, *The Oath of Vayuputras*, argues and to a great extent convinces that the culture of the nation, that ignores the Laws of Nature, violates it, while the one that follows Laws of Nature leads its nation towards enlightenment. For fulfilling, harmonious and progressive life one is required to live in accordance with Laws of Nature or Dharma. The trilogy gives a glimpse of myths combining the narrative excess with philosophical debate. It is based on the construction of the existence of Indian mythical God Shiva as the legendary figure in 1900 B. C. It is a literary construction mingled with the pseudo historical material.

Amish depicts rich Indian culture and its values by recreating the myth of Shiva, first as an ordinary human being enjoying chillum of marijuana then as a gifted warrior armed with snake and trishul. In Hindu mythology, while Sati or Parvati represents marriage and motherhood, Kali stands for destruction. She is also the one who protects and sacrifices for her children (devotees). Hence through Parvati or Kali Amish presents the cultural image of Indian lady who is an embodiment of endurance, sacrifice and compassion.

The first novel is set in Meluha and Ayodhya, capital of Swadweep, while its sequel takes the readers to Kashi, Magadh, Brangaridai and Dandak forests. The kingdom of Suryavanshis is Meluha and that of Chandravanshis is Swadweep. Meluha runs along the lines of Ram Rajya and strictly follows the Laws of Lord Rama. A true Suryavanshi's obligation is to execute his capabilities to the utmost level for the sake of Meluhan ethics. Since, for Indians, life is not just a biological process or a physical phenomenon. Knowing the Self and consequent reunion with

the sublime will deliver from the death and this world. This has been described the fundamental concept of human life. Dr. Radhakishnan very aptly comments:

The goal of life is communion with the Supreme. It is a life of realization, a gnosis, an inner intuitive vision of God, when man achieves absolute freedom and escapes from the blind servitude to ordinary experiences. It is a subtle interwovenness with the realities of the spiritual world. (Religion and Culture, 22)

The Meluhan Suryavanshis live by “Satya, Dharma, Maan’; Truth, Duty, Honour” (62) which are the nucleus values of Indian cultural identity. They say about Rama’s teaching: “If you have to choose between my people and dharma, choose dharma! If you have to choose between my family and dharma, choose dharma! Even if you choose between me and dharma, always choose dharma! (The Oath of Vayuputras, 282)

The different properties of rivers, rocks, forests, temperatures influenced the cultural life of Meluhans. Brangas and Nagas share the negative effects of Meluhan life and hence deviate greatly from the Meluhan culture. Swadweepans, a Chandravanshi kingdom, deprived of the geographic and climatic advantages of Meluhan life created difference in their mannerisms, traditions and behaviors. Since they receive limited supply of Saraswati waters so only royalty is benefited by Somras. They have special reverence for the rivers as Amish presents, “The Saraswati River was not just a body of water to most Indians; in fact, no river was. And the Saraswati was the holiest among them all. It was their spiritual mother.”(The Oath of the Vayuputras, 292). The overpopulated Ayodhyans live chaotic life and have compromised with Laws of Ram on various grounds. Vayuputras and Parihans lived holistic life and remained unpolluted in isolated lands where, with their efforts, they have created their own world unreachable by others. Thus the climatic and the geographical factors shape the physiology and psychology of the individual and the society of the region.

The great variety in landscape, climate and conditions of life prepared in the mind a readiness to accept differences. Besides, the vast spaces offered room for slow infiltration by newcomers and allowed each locality unhampered scope of development along its own lines. The geographical unity of the country has had its effects on the economic life of the people. The size of the country and quality of the land permitted gradual increase in population and expansion of cultivation. The fact that India has continually developed and maintained an agricultural economy for almost four or five thousand years explains in part the depth and tenacity of her culture and traditions. The primacy of agricultural economy led to the development of common characteristics and a common outlook. In Indian culture it is believed that a ruler’s actions or Karma decides the fate of the land as Parvateshwar says, “A leader’s karma impacts his entire land. He is supposed to be his people’s icon. That is a universal truth.”(The Oath of the Vayuputras, 59)

Amish gives a historical glimpse of 1900 B.C India through Shiva's journey in the Trilogy. Shiva, a youth from Tibet begins his journey from Mt. Kailash in Tibet to Meluha via Srinagar and Hariyupa and then Swadweep kingdom via Ayodhya, Kashi and Magadh. Here Tripathi presents a unique quality of India -universal brotherhood which assimilates every culture in itself as he says: "We accept every community from India in Kashi. All of them live peacefully, making this great city their home." (The Secret of Nagas, 72)". Tripathi depicts how Indian culture has always been engrossed in achieving the spiritual that promotes moral values and the attitudes of generosity, simplicity and frugality. It pervades the numerous castes, tribes, ethnic and religious groups including countless sects. The structure of Indian culture gives pivotal position to human beings within a conception of the universe as a divine creation. It is not anthropoid-centric only but considers all elements of creation, both living and even non-living, as manifestations of the divine. Therefore, it respects God's design and promotes the ideal of co-existence. This vision thus, synthesizes human beings, nature and God into one integral whole. This is reflected in the idea of satyam-shivam-sundaram.

As a man Shiva brings social reformation in totalitarian society of Meluha. His fulfilling harmonious and progressive life is lived in accordance with Dharma. He marries widowed Sati, accepts Ganesh, born out of her first marriage, as his son. He promotes evolution that leads nation towards higher state of consciousness. This makes him an enlightened human being, Neelkanth. People of Meluha, Swadweep, Branga and Naga become his followers. These men sacrifice their duty (swadharma) for the greater good, Universal Dharma. Universal cultural views that Shiva stands for is beyond social determinism. Having completed his Karma, Pashupati returns to his place of origin. In his interactions with the Vasudevas, Shiva rises to self-consciousness. Vasudevas are informative, but Shiva is investigative. He sees things external to him. In an attempt to know them he works on them and shapes them. His interactions with Kali, Ganesh, Parashuram and societies of Meluhans and Swadeepans, in general, enable him to inwardise them. In his way he gains self-consciousness. Indian philosophy believes that at birth, an individual's mind contains past impressions. These impressions combined with hereditary constitution and social influences develop the psyche of an individual. Vasudevas in the novels address Shiva as 'fellow traveller in karma, karmasaathi'.

Shiva evolves through continuous development of consciousness to become a universal human being. He represents universal mechanics of creation and lives higher states of consciousness. The concept of Karma (action) and Reincarnation have special importance in Indian culture. It is believed that one gains virtue during good action and takes birth in higher order in his next birth and spends a comfortable life. The one doing bad action takes birth in lower order in his next birth and suffers pain and leads a miserable life. Upanishads say that the Principle of fruits of action is correct. A man gets the fruits as per the action he does. Only man has been bestowed with intelligence that enables him to distinguish between vices and virtues and that makes man to modify his actions, so as to improve the next birth also. Continuously performing good actions in

all his birth, leads to salvation, i.e liberation from the cycle of birth and death. This concept is not only of the Upanishads but is also the basis of the Jainism, Buddhism, etc. In this way, the concept of reincarnation is associated with the principle of action. The actual cause of reincarnation is the actions done in the previous birth.

Spirituality is the soul of Indian culture where the existence of soul is accepted. Therefore, the ultimate aim of man is not physical comforts but is self-realisation which is based on Dharma. More explicitly Kanakhala, the Meluhan Pime Minister elucidates, "...dharma is that which is well judged by your mind; think deeply about dharma and your mind will tell you what is right...dharma protects those who protect it." (The Oath of Vayuputras, 435-436). Contrary to rights, Indian culture emphasises dharma or moral duty. performance of duty is supreme instead of asserting one's right. It also establishes a harmonious blending between duty and rights. Thus, through the emphasis on community obligations, Indian culture promotes interdependence rather than Independence and autonomy of the individual.

Tripathi depicts typical social stratification of Indian culture. India, which inhabits more than 200 castes, has a social structure involving thousands of castes and sub-castes. Surprisingly, it decides the social status of a person on the basis of birth. The Immortals of Meluha acquaints the readers to ancient Indian culture especially with its social structure. As usual the Meluhan society has been divided into four categories- Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. Brahmins represent teachers, lawers, priests, and other intellectual professionals. The second group Kshatriyas, are the warriors and rulers while Vaishyas are craftsmen, traders and business people and finally the Shudras who are the farmers and workers. In this social hierarchy, one caste cannot do another caste's job. Every caste has been allotted a particular amulet. The amulet symbolizing the shoulders of the Parmatma means that the wearer is a Kshatriya. Nandi gives a clear picture of this social structure as:

Well, if the lines are drawn to represent the head of the Parmatma, it would mean the wearer is a Brahmin. The symbol for a Vaishya would be the lines forming a symbol of the thighs of the Parmatma. And the feet of the Parmatma on the amulet would make the wearer a Shudra. (The Immortals of Meluha, 38)

In this way every Meluhan is allotted amulets and ordained symbols. The amulets that categorically represent their castes are supposed to wear round the clock. The Chandravanshis along with the Nagas too represent the marginalized section of the Meluhan society. Though the Nagas possess tremendous strength and skills, they are not treated as human and not allowed to live in their country by the Meluhans as Nandi comment, "They are born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or misshapen faces...They are not allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu"(Meluha, 59).

Though in the Trilogy, Shiva distraught in pain ignores his divine duty and almost destabilizes the world, enlightened Neelkanth restores the stability of the subcontinent by engaging in the war and using Pashupatiasra. After Shiva's victory and destruction of Somras factory, river Ganga that carries soul of pure Saraswati, meets Yamuna and reaches Brangas who worship it as their mother. Their land is now as habitable. Hindu mythology credits heroic austerities of Bhagiratha for bringing Ganga on the earth. The novelist admires Bhagiratha, the son of Dilipa and prince of Ayodhya for his unflinching faith in Shiva and active participation in the Dharamyudhh.

Amish, in accordance to Indian philosophy re-enlivens the universal field of pure consciousness. He portrays the world in Shiva Trilogy as a relative existence. Its existence is dependent on Brahma. According to the Upanishads, Brahma is existence, Consciousness and endless. This renders Brahma, characteristic of immutability. Indian philosophy believes Brahma to be the only Reality, the absolute existence. Tripathi maintains that man in his pristine existence was glorious but now in this world is in fallen state. Amish's method of philosophizing seems to be of great relevance in the present world of restlessness and unease. He emphasizes that Cultural values are essential for preservation of life. One may have various perceptions in a particular situation but only the right insight should come out just like a green leaf appears green because it absorbs all the colours except green which we perceive. There are so many realities, various versions. "Whatever appears as the unshakable truth, its exact opposite may also be true in another context. One's reality is but perception, viewed through various prisms of context." (Meluha, 295-96) Shiva understands the culture of Meluha and this knowledge helps him to facilitate communication with Suryavanshis. With an intercultural approach that involves not only knowing about another culture but also attempting to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others he engages in uprooting the Evil from the life of people. In this way, Amish's philosophy differs from the Western one where culture implies "customary knowledge" regardless of universal laws that govern geography and culture.

Hence, The Trilogy is a successful attempt to revive the culture, tradition, history and mythological belief of India by bringing to the centre of thinking, the Laws of Nature. Tripathi through his imaginative faculty recognizes the rich Indian cultural identity and her historical unity.

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