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Humanizing the Divine: Analyzing the Felix Culpa of Amish Tripathi's Pop-Mythological Fictions in the Shiva Trilogy

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Abstract:

If catering the celestial sublimity to the mundane plates is an art, Amish Tripathi is the master of it. It needs no saying that Amish Tripathi is one of the most renowned authors among the contemporary pop-mythologists. Most of his works are a revisionist exercise in the art of retelling the ancient Indian epics and divine phenomena. Though revisionist approaches tend to be the voice for the 'voiceless', they are not free from the *felix culpa* of humanizing the divinity. Limiting the limitless, defining the undefinable, and restraining the unrestrainable can unquestionably lead to a new dimension of alternatives, but the alternatives can also be confronted and questioned by the pre-existing order of the original works. Whereas questioning the reasonability of the original works is celebrated, questioning the validity of the questions must not go unchecked. It is an emphatic assertion that pop-mythology may endeavour to reshape the original mythological scriptures (if they can be termed as 'mythology' at all), but it can never subvert the original texts from which it itself has originated. Therefore, there remains the possibility of the lacunas for the *felix culpa* to come into action. No pop-mythologist is free from it, and so is not Amish Tripathi. Following the library method of research, this paper is going to explicitly analyze how the aforementioned speculation can actually be illustrated as a questioning enquiry, if not criticism. Some Indic words and names have been transliterated for the sake of convenience, following the IAST method of transliteration.

Keywords: Pop-mythology; distortion; actuality; ignorance; deception.

Distortion of belief procures a radical fancy. Pop-mythologists are the harbingers of this illusion which they try to establish as an act of illumination. Reading Amish Tripathi's fantasy books can be compared to a sinister voyage to the land of half-truths. Perfidious to facts, the books distort, dislevel, and denigrate the actual events, characterizations, geographical locations, identities, and conceptualizations of the *Sanātana dharma*. Horrendous it may appear at times, but literature allows the creative distortion and provides a scope of observing the actuality in a topsy-turvy mode. Amish Tripathi has left no stone unturned to utilize this opportunity in its fullest measure. The very inception of this radical fancy can be located in the susceptible declaration of the notion that all deities were humans once and the attribution of godhood to their names became as a result of popular belief systems taking over factual amnesia. Amish Tripathi has stated in his own website that myths are nothing but some "jumbled memories of the past" which are "buried under mounds of earth and ignorance". However, since pop-mythology itself is self-assertive of its own amnesia of popular belief systems, the questions that it puts forward should not pass unchecked. Assuming it hypothetically, a researcher can proceed to prove the actuality of divine phenomena by providing contrary facts to the negative connotations that pop-mythology makes. In other words, proving contrary facts to Amish Tripathi's pop-mythology can be denoted as an attempt to assert the validity of the actual mythology (if it can be termed so at all).

The very first observation that can be made is the degradation of the divine personae as well as their personification in Amish's books, especially the *Shiva Trilogy*, which comprises of *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*. The projection of Śiva as a tribal nomad who smokes marijuana is void of previous mentions in the spiritual texts. It can be depicted as a blatant disapproval of facts presented in the *Śiva Purāṇa* which states that Śiva is free from all sorts of addictions and affections. The unschooled gibberish penned down about the deities in the previously mentioned book can be pardoned since Amish Tripathi lacks the lessons of classical Sanskrit due to the anglophile upbringing at his alma mater. But, they must not be excused where critical observations are needed. The fault that amuses one the most is that the events in the *Shiva Trilogy*— from the emergence of Śiva to the land of Meluha to his voluntary retirement to Mount Kailāsa — take the span of nearly two hundred years. Thus it emerges that if Śiva has to be projected as a human, he cannot live the supernatural lifespan. More interestingly, Amish Tripathi mentions that Meluha was an empire

built by Lord Rāma which is an inglorious defiance of historical contexts. Chronologically, Rāma's incarnation took place after Lord Śiva—a fact which is not just recorded by Vālmīki, the author of the *Rāmāyana*, but also by all prominent historians and Indologists of modern times. Not only this, there is a geographical problem which can be marked in this context. The concluding book of the *Shiva Trology*, titled as *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, states that the river Sarasvati was extinct by that time, which is again historically incorrect because the flowing stream of the river has been mentioned by Vyāsa in the *Mahābhārata*, which was written later on. That factual inadequacy is a stalwart sign of Amish Tripathi's pop-mythology.

As the plot of *The Immortals of Meluha* unfolds itself, we find that Dakṣa, the king of Meluha, sends his emissaries to Tibet to invite Śiva, whereas the actual event was polar opposite (as stated in the *Śiva Purāṇa*). The actual event, as it follows, was that Dakṣa had refused to invite Śiva as he was a grotesque vagabond residing in the crematorium with his body covered with ashes from the pyres. The episode of Ayurvati discovering that Śiva was the 'Neelkanth', their fabled saviour, is undoubtedly a fruit of imagination. In the first book of the *Shiva Trology*, Śiva remains asymptomatic to the narcotic potion called 'somarasa' (except the fact that his throat became dark blue), whereas the other tribesmen fall ill. This leads the Meluhans to assume and ascertain that Śiva was the 'Neelkanth'. There is no such mention of the event in any of the scriptures or epics. As the *Śiva Purāṇa* states, it was during the 'samudra manthana' (the churning of the ocean) when the most poisonous gall called 'halāhala' turned up before the 'amṛta' (a divine nectar which makes anyone immortal) could be produced. The gall was so potentially devastating that it could demobilize the whole of the universe. Therefore, Śiva was requested to intervene and protect the deities as well as the demons who were churning the ocean together. Śiva drank the poison and swooned, with his throat turned bruise-like blue. It was Śiva's divine consort, goddess Pārvatī, who took the form of Mahāvidyā Tārā and choked his throat to pause the flow of the poison, containing it there forever. In the *Tārā Rahasyam*, a sacred text on *tantra*, the event is little different than the *Śiva Purāṇa*. There it is stated that goddess Tara breastfed lord Śiva to raise his consciousness from the swooning effects of the poison. Thus, the poison did affect Śiva and it was his wife who saved him. How Amish Tripathi obliterated this significant role and event of a woman is a question that is bound to strike the reader's mind. One possible clue to the fact can be that Amish Tripathi himself has stated about his attractions to masculinist tendencies which propels him immensely.

Distortions of female characters and their feminine sensibility prolong further. The first book of the *Shiva Trology* states that Satī had a previous incarnation which is not supported by the *Purāṇas*. It was goddess Pārvatī whose first incarnation was in the form of Satī. Whereas Amish projects Śiva as a Bollywood hero courting the heroine Satī, the *Śiva Purāṇa* tells a completely altered story where it is Satī who tries to woo and seduce Śiva, succeeding in her mission to have him as her husband. Whereas in Amish Tripathi's fantasy books king Dakṣa is shown as appreciative of Śiva, the *Śiva Purāṇa* states Dakṣa's antipathy for Śiva due to his persona. Interestingly enough, Satī is an 'untouchable' as she is a 'vikarma'. Two things need to be mentioned clearly in this context. Firstly, in the actual scriptures, there is no mention of any social practice of 'untouchability'. Secondly, Amish Tripathi has utterly failed to understand the meaning of the Sanskrit term 'vikarma' which means, if literally translated, 'activities against the injunctions marked by righteousness'. Thus, the concepts present and illustrated in Sanskrit texts do not go well with the phantasmagoria that Amish Tripathi has produced.

The role of Bṛhaspati in guiding Śiva to locate the origin and manufacturing unit of the narcotic beverage called 'somasara' is a pure fiction and has no connection to any Sanskrit literary text. Amish Tripathi has presented the 'somasara' as analogical to alcohol. The first book of *Shiva Trology* makes it clear that that the undiluted 'somasara' is as lethal as the undiluted alcohol. More ludicrously, he author states that the 'somasara' is produced with the water of the river Sarasvati. Whereas there can be no denial that the 'somasara' is certainly a narcotic beverage, it should also not be overlooked that, according to the *Purāṇas*, the potion was made with the extracts of numerous medicinal herbs which strengthened the neurotic order of consumer's body. The way Amish Tripathi has delineated the manufacturing unit of the 'somasara' has a striking similarity with the international soft drinks manufacturing companies. Perhaps, it can be excused as one of the instances where the author's 'businessman mind' has taken over his creative genius. Whatever it may be, it is hardly lethal as recorded by Ayurvedic texts.

The battle between the Meluhans and the Swadeepans has no trace in the *Purāṇas* or in history, and therefore it is a product of Amish Tripathi's imaginative genius. Even more interestingly, Amish Tripathi marks the Meluhans as *Suryavaṇśīs* and the Swadeepans as the *Candravaṇśīs*, projecting them as archenemies. In the *Purāṇas*, the differentiations were made between the lifestyles of the aforementioned clans, but the belligerence that Amish Tripathi has

excessively aggrandized has no mention at all. However, the battle ends when the *Candravaṅśī* princess, Anandmayi, confronts Śiva and informs him that he is also their fabled 'Neelkanth'. Śiva is flabbergasted when she informs that a prophecy was made in past that Śiva, the Neelkanth, would become their saviour, protecting them from the *Suryavaṅśīs*. Here, the author states that the *Suryavaṅśīs* are the clan which Lord Rāma had established whereas Vālmīki's *Rāmāyana* states that it was Rāma who was born to the *Suryavaṅśī* king, Daśaratha. Thus, be it racial, ethnical, or tribal identity, the *Suryavaṅśī* clan existed before the incarnation of Lord Rāma, and he was certainly not the founder of it.

Amish Tripathi projects the *Suryavaṅśīs* as the followers of truth, duty, and honour, whereas the *Candravaṅśīs* have been projected as the followers of passion, beauty, and liberty. This differentiation that the author has made is shrewdly political. Casting a mere glance at the political scenario of the USA, one can understand that the *Suryavaṅśīs* resemble the conservative Republicans, whereas the *Candravaṅśīs* resemble the liberal Democrats in their ideological attributes respectively. From the global political scenario, the *Suryavaṅśīs* resemble the right-wing political ideologies whereas the *Candravaṅśīs* resemble the left-wing ones. However, the ancient Indians were followers of *Sanātana dharma* which amalgamated the aspects of truth, duty, and honour with the aspects of passion, beauty, and liberty. The *Suryavaṅśīs* were the followers of the solar calendar and the *Candravaṅśīs* were the followers of the lunar calendar. However, there was no clash between these different clans based on their spiritual identities since the *Sanatana dharma* believes that all followers of different belief-systems eventually mingle into one. The author of the *Shiva Trilogy* has gravely missed this beautiful aspect of the Indian culture which believes that the day and the night are not oppositional, but rather the fulfilment of each other.

Śiva's journey to Kāśī along with Satī is once again a distortion of the actual event in the *The Secret of the Nagas*. According to *Śiva Purāṇa*, Kashi is a city that was built by goddess Pārvatī as an abode of the *bhaktas* of Lord Śiva. As the author of *The Secret of the Nagas* states, the wise men at Kashi, who are a group of grotesque monks with their bodies smeared by ashes, are actually the *aghorīs*. In Amish Tripathi's book, they reveal to Śiva about his *karma*, his past life, and about his capabilities to change the future. But a complete contrast can be noticed in the *Śiva Purāṇa* which states that it was Śiva who revealed to the monks and the sages about the

wisdom of the karma. Thus, the author has cleverly twisted the actual event in order to humanize the character of Śiva in his book.

The character of Satī is not excluded from the list of humanized deities. In the second book of the *Shiva Trilogy*, the author depicts that Satī gives birth to Kārtikeya— an event that once again compels us to question Amish Tripathi's knowledge about the Sanskrit literature. Not just in the *Śiva Purāṇa* and *Skanda Purāṇa*, but also in the *Mahābhārata* (Vana Parva, Chapter 222-225) it has been delineated minutely that Kārtikeya was not the biological son of Pārvatī (or Satī). As the *Mahābhārata* states, Agni had emerged from Śiva and Swaha from Pārvatī. Kartik was the biological son of Agni and Svāhā. However, due to problems in pregnancy, the conceived issue was transferred to the womb of Gangā, the river goddess. After giving birth to Kārtikeya, Gangā had bestowed the child to the wives of the *Saptarṣi* (the seven sages glorified in the *Veda*). However, later on, Pārvatī had acknowledged him as his son.

The author does not stop there. He also projects Gaṇeśa as Satī's child from her first marriage, which not only obliterates the actual event, but also vociferously undermines the gravity of the characters. It is evident that the author is either drastically flawed in his readings of Sanskrit literature, or he has been misled by loony tales that he had come across on the internet. It must be kept in mind that the author himself has admitted time and again that he relies heavily on internet sources to collect materials for his pop-mythology. The origin of Gaṇeśa has an utterly different storyline. Whereas Gaṇeśa has been portrayed by Amish Tripathi as a child born with physical deformity, it was not so in the *Śiva Purāṇa*. Thus, the author has completely overlooked Gaṇeśa's previous form, Vinanyaka. More appalling is the projection of the concept of physical deformity. It is no secret that the *Sanātana* culture of ancient India has always celebrated physical deformities and treated them as mere physical differences. However, Amish Tripathi has gravely missed this beautiful aspect of Indian civilization in the second book of *Shiva Trology* as he cynically and ignorantly demonstrates how Kālī and Gaṇeśa were ostracized and looked down upon by King Dakṣa and other Meluhans owing to their extra-functioning appendages. Moreover, the portrayal of Dakṣa's character has been very sly. The author mentions that Dakṣa had killed Satī's first husband, but fails to name him in the entire series. This brings the discourse to the notion that deception may look literary, but it is bound to fall fragile in front of the true art.

The final book of the *Shiva Trilogy* seems artistically barren and a dexterous attempt to clear the loose ends left in the previous books. Events such as forming the Vayuputra council and meeting the newly created fictional figures such as the Vasudeva pundit Gopal, Śīva's maternal uncle Mithra, and Kārtikeya - Gaṇeśa duo attacking Ayodhya to stop them from helping Meluhans et cetera are ludicrously modelled. The 'somarasa' episode also plays a vital role here as Śīva declares of holy war on Meluha when it is revealed to be the hub of 'somarasa' manufacturing units. It is also stated that the deformity of the physical shapes among the Nāga folks is due to the contamination of the Brahmaputra river in which the Meluhans used to dump the wastes of the 'somarasa' production. It makes a succinct implication that the deformity of goddess Kālī, the chieftain of the Nāgas, results from the aforementioned cause. The portrayal of sage Bhṛgu as the mastermind behind this misdeed does not support the previous book and pose an infirmity to the establishment of the trilogy sequence. The question comes in the reader's mind that why Bhṛgu would allow Dakṣa to invite Śīva to Meluha if he had the foreknowledge about Śīva's being the 'Neelkanth'. Moreover, one more distortion of the real events can be found when Mithra, another fictional character dexterously employed by the author to fix the lacunas in the development of the plot, convinces the Vayuputra about Śīva's being the chosen 'Neelkanth'. Here, the book almost frantically tries to depict that it was Mithra who persuaded the Vayuputras to bestow the 'Paṣupati astra' to him. It appears as if the author wants to bring an analogy between the Vayuputras and Hephaestus, the maker of the heavenly weapons, according to Greek mythology. Hephaestus, the heavenly ironsmith, was the son of Zeus and Hera, and the husband of Aphrodite. It is stated that he modelled the sceptre of Zeus (which he used to hurl thunderbolts), the trident of Poseidon, and the bident of Hades. Thus, Amish Tripathi, perhaps unknowingly, has drawn a sceptic analogy weapons mentioned in the *Purāṇas* and the weapons mentioned in the Greek mythology. However, unlike the Greek mythology, Śīva actually created the *Paṣupati astra* by himself and it was he who bestowed the weapon to Arjuna later on, as states the *Mahābhārata*.

Amish Tripathi has developed a complex plot where he brings Egyptian assassins to sabotage Śīva's further endeavours. However, Satī's espionage in the council saves her husband, but she herself is mortally wounded. The author seems to explain valour only in terms of masculinity, and utterly avoid the feminine valour of the actual event. Satī had voluntarily embraced the sacred bonfire of the yajña which itself had risen from her own dhyana. Such a

solemn and sacrosanct sacrifice from the most celebrated feminine figure in the entire *Shiva Trilogy* has been drastically ignored by the author. Even if Satī's demise can be regarded as a form of human cycle, her altered role in the Śiva Trology does not pay tribute to her legacy at all.

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