

Myth as Commodity: The Publishing Industry, Media Institutions, and the Cultural Re-Engineering of Mythology in Amish Tripathi's Fiction

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Abstract:

The present paper undertakes an examination of how Hindu mythology functions as a strategic cultural commodity within the contemporary Indian publishing industry, taking the mythological fiction of Amish Tripathi — principally the *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–2013) and the *Ram Chandra Series* (2015 onwards) — as its primary empirical and analytical case for this purpose. Situating the argument within Raymond Williams's theory of media institutions as cultural producers, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of the literary field, and the political economy of publishing as it is articulated by John B. Thompson, the paper contends that publishers, over-the-top streaming platforms, digital recommendation algorithms, and cross-media marketing systems is not neutral conduits for pre-existing cultural content but active agents in the production of meaning who shapes that content at every stage of its circulation. The paper analyses how these institutional forces shapes the narrative content, formal structures, and ideological orientations of Tripathi's mythological fiction, arguing that the re-engineering of the Shiva and Rama myths for a post-liberalisation, aspirational Hindu middle-class readership is as much a product of market logic as of any literary imagination that the author himself brings to the material. By foregrounding production conditions rather than textual content alone, the paper advances a methodological argument for a political economy of popular mythology in India that is attentive to the structural relationship between capital, technology, institution, and narrative.

Keywords: Amish Tripathi; myth; publishing industry; cultural production; OTT platforms; Raymond Williams; Bourdieu; literary field; Hindu middle class; political economy of culture.

I. Introduction: The Return of the Gods in the Age of the Market

In the month of October in the year 2010, a former investment banker by the name of Amish Tripathi releases a novel whose central subject was the figure of Shiva himself. The narrative premise which the novel advanced was, by any measure, an unusual one: Shiva was presented not as a deity in the conventional theological sense but as a mortal man, a Tibetan tribal chief of exceptional personal qualities and considerable physical courage, who would gradually come to understand that his very human nature — the ordinariness of his origin and the extraordinariness of his moral choices — was, in itself, the deepest and most philosophically adequate source of whatever divinity could be meaningfully

attributed to him. *The Immortals of Meluha* was, by the accounts of those directly involved in the attempt, initially turned away by several of the mainstream publishers to whom it was submitted, and was brought to readers through a combination of self-publication and targeted digital outreach directed toward the online communities that had by that time been organised around Hindu spirituality, Hindu cultural identity, and Hindu mythology in their various digital forms. The strategy worked considerably beyond any reasonable expectation that its initiators might have entertained.

The novel sold steadily through its earliest months, then with gathering speed, then with what can only be described as an explosive velocity that surprised the Indian publishing industry, which had not previously experienced a vernacular-flavoured, spiritually inflected English-language fiction achieving such extraordinary commercial traction in so compressed a period of time. By the time Westland Books had acquired the publishing rights and released the second volume of the series, *The Secret of the Nagas*, in the year 2011, Amish Tripathi had become, by the standard measure of copies sold, the fastest-selling English-language author in the recorded history of Indian publishing — a commercial distinction he would retain through the conclusion of *the Shiva Trilogy* with *The Oath of the Vayuputras* in the year 2013.

The scale and speed of this success invites questions of a kind that lies well beyond the competence of conventional literary criticism to adequately address. *The Shiva Trilogy* does not distinguish itself as a literary achievement by the particular quality of its prose style, the psychological complexity of its characterisation, or the structural originality of its narrative architecture. Its achievement lies elsewhere entirely, and it is the task of this paper to identify and analyse the nature of that achievement with appropriate analytical rigour. The achievement lies, this paper argues, in the precision with which the novels identified, addressed, and in doing so helped to constitute a specific reading community whose cultural needs and aspirational orientations had not previously found adequate literary expression; in the sophistication with which the project navigated the intersecting and sometimes competing demands of a rapidly transforming Indian publishing market, a culturally assertive and increasingly self-confident Hindu middle class, and a digital media ecosystem that was still in the process of discovering its own commercial and cultural possibilities. Understanding this achievement in any analytically satisfying way requires a framework capable of attending not merely to what the text says when it is read in isolation but to how it came to be — what institutional forces shaped its form, what market logics governed the decisions that determine its production, and what cultural interests its extraordinary commercial success ultimately served.

This paper proposes such a framework, drawing in a coordinated manner on three major theoretical resources: Raymond Williams's theory of media institutions as active cultural producers rather than neutral cultural distributors; Pierre Bourdieu's structural analysis of the literary field and the forms of capital that circulates within it; and the political economy of contemporary publishing articulated by John B. Thompson in his landmark study of the Anglo-American industry. The argument that follows proceeds through four principal movements: a theoretical exposition of the framework; an analysis of the publishing institution and its role in the cultural production of Tripathi's mythological fiction from its earliest self-published iterations to its conglomerate-backed commercial form; an examination of digital platforms and algorithmic recommendation systems as active shapers of cultural meaning and cultural visibility; and a consideration of the structural relationships between market logic, narrative form, and ideological content. The paper concludes by making a methodological argument for a political economy

of popular mythology in India that is adequate to the specific and historically novel conditions of cultural production in the contemporary moment.

II. Theoretical Foundations: Institutions, Fields, and Cultural Production

Williams and the Institution as Cultural Producer

Raymond Williams's sustained and theoretically productive attention to the social conditions of cultural production constitutes one of the most enduring contributions of twentieth-century cultural theory to the analysis of literature, media, and the arts in their social dimensions. Against what Williams himself termed the 'reflection' model of the relationship between culture and society — a model which treated cultural texts as mirrors of a pre-existing social reality that they passively registered and reproduced — Williams proposed a 'production' model of considerably greater analytical power that foregrounds the active role which cultural institutions, technologies, and social relations play in shaping what gets made in any given historical period, how the cultural object is shaped in terms of its formal and generic properties, and what meanings it is capable of carrying to the social audiences that receives it. This argument, which Williams developed across *The Long Revolution* (1961), *Marxism and Literature* (1977), and *The Sociology of Culture* (1981) across the better part of two productive decades, rests on the foundational theoretical claim that the conditions of cultural production is not external to cultural meanings in any analytically serious sense but are, rather, internal to it: they determine not only the distribution of cultural objects among social audiences but the very nature and character of those cultural objects at the most fundamental level.

Williams's analysis of what he termed 'cultural institutions' in *The Sociology of Culture* is particularly pertinent to the analytical project of this paper. He distinguishes between several distinct institutional forms — the patronage system of pre-capitalist cultural production, the post-patronage market, the professional organisation, and the modern corporate institution — and argued that each of these forms produces distinctive kinds of cultural work with distinctive social orientations that reflects the material conditions of their own production. The contemporary publishing conglomerate, with its advance-and-royalty contractual system, its subsidiary rights architecture of considerable complexity, its retail partnerships with major bookselling chains and digital platforms, and its multinational ownership structures that connects the Indian market to global capital, represents a specific institutional form with specific cultural consequences that is both analytically distinguishable from earlier forms and practically consequential for the cultural objects it helps to produce. It produces cultural goods that is calibrated to the demands of a mass market whose preferences and purchasing patterns it both monitors and helps to shape; it organises those goods for reproducibility and franchise extension rather than formal singularity; and it is oriented toward the extraction of maximum value from proven intellectual properties across the full range of commercial possibilities that those properties makes available.

The significance of Williams's theoretical framework for the analysis of Tripathi's mythological fiction lies precisely in its insistence that these institutional conditions is not merely contextual or background information to be acknowledged and set aside before the real literary analysis begins. They are constitutive of the cultural object itself. *The Shiva Trilogy* is not a retelling of ancient Hindu myth that subsequently, by some contingent process of market discovery, found its way into the contemporary publishing market; it is, rather, a cultural object produced within and through the institutional conditions of that market, and those conditions is inscribed — in ways that this paper will attempt to demonstrate through sustained textual and institutional analysis — in its narrative form, its mode of address to its

implied readership, its generic conventions, and its ideological orientations. To read the novel without attending to the institution is to make the methodological error of mistaking the finished product for the complex social process of its production.

Bourdieu and the Structure of the Literary Field

Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production, which is most fully and systematically elaborated in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and *The Rules of Art* (1996), provides a complementary theoretical framework for understanding the structured social space within which Tripathi's novels was produced and consumed, and for situating their author's career within the dynamics of competition and position-taking that characterises the literary field as Bourdieu theorises it. Bourdieu analyses the literary field as a structured space of positions and position-takings in which agents of various kinds — authors, publishers, critics, prize committees, academic institutions, and readers — compete for the different forms of capital that the field makes available. Economic capital, measured in the more or less direct currency of sales figures, advance payments, and subsidiary rights income, and symbolic capital, measured in the more indirect but no less real currency of critical prestige, institutional recognition, and canonical status, is the primary currencies of this competition, and the field as a whole is structured by the perennial and structurally irreducible tension between what Bourdieu terms the relatively autonomous pole — oriented toward cultural legitimacy and characteristically indifferent to the demands of immediate commercial success — and the heteronomous pole, oriented toward the market and measured primarily by the commercial indicators of popular approval.

Tripathi's career describes a distinctive and analytically instructive trajectory within this structured field. His initial self-publication, taken in the context of Bourdieu's field theory, places him by definition outside the institutional structures and networks of consecration through which symbolic capital is normally conferred on literary work in the Indian publishing context. The subsequent acquisition by Westland Books transformed his position within the field in ways that extended well beyond the practical matter of improved distribution: it recodes his cultural meaning within the field, repositioning him from the status of a commercially ambitious enthusiast who lacks institutional backing to that of a serious and institutionally legitimated cultural figure, and enabling the accumulation of a distinctive form of symbolic capital — popular cultural authority, a claim to centrality within an important and growing cultural conversation — that is analytically distinct from, though not simply inferior to, the symbolic capital accumulated by the literary establishment whose productions occupy the autonomous pole. His novels explicitly and consistently claims philosophical and spiritual legitimacy for their project — they is presented to their readership as modern and accessible interpretations of the ancient wisdom traditions that lie at the heart of the Hindu civilizational inheritance — while simultaneously achieving the kind of extraordinary commercial success that places them firmly at the heteronomous pole. This simultaneous accumulation of different forms of capital represents a specific and unusual kind of field position: that of the legitimate popular author, whose cultural authority derives precisely from the breadth of the audience he commands rather than from the narrowness of the audience whose taste he satisfies.

Thompson and the Political Economy of Publishing

John B. Thompson's *Merchants of Culture* (2010), though its primary empirical focus falls on the Anglo-American publishing industry rather than the Indian one, identifies structural logics within contemporary publishing that is operative in the Indian market with a force and consistency that makes the framework

directly applicable to the present analysis. Thompson's most analytically consequential observation concerns the rise of what he terms the 'logic of the blockbuster': the progressive concentration of publisher investment in a relatively small number of titles expected to generate returns sufficiently large to subsidise an entire publishing list whose less commercially productive titles would not, taken individually, justify the investment they requires. This structural logic produces a number of important cultural consequences that is directly relevant to the analysis of Tripathi's publishing career. It tends systematically to favour proven narrative formulas over formal experimentation that carries commercial risk; it favours the cultivation of established and identifiable audience segments over the discovery and development of emerging or marginal ones; and it creates powerful institutional incentives for publishers to seek out and acquire books that resembles previously successful books — a conservative tendency that is further amplified, as this paper will argue in a later section, by the recommendation algorithms of digital retail platforms whose operational logic reinforces precisely this commercial conservatism.

Thompson's analysis of the subsidiary rights economy is equally relevant to the specific case under examination in this paper. The commercial value of a literary property in the contemporary publishing market is no longer measured by any single metric, and certainly not by the metric of book sales alone; it is measured, rather, by the totality of its rights potential across all the commercial categories that the contemporary media landscape makes available — translation rights for international markets, film rights, television and streaming series rights, merchandise rights, digital rights, and the full range of ancillary and derivative rights through which a single narrative property can be commercialised across multiple media and multiple national markets simultaneously. A novel that constitutes a potential streaming series for one of the major OTT platforms, a potential Bollywood film franchise, a potential merchandise brand for the devotional and aspirational goods market, and a potential digital gaming universe is worth considerably more to a forward-looking publisher than a novel whose commercial value is circumscribed by the printed page. This rights economy directly and materially shapes acquisition decisions at the level of the individual manuscript, and through those decisions it shapes, systematically and over time, the kinds of fiction that gets produced, promoted, and amplified within the culture.

III. The Publishing Institution as Myth-Maker From Self-Publication to Conglomerate Capital

The institutional history of *The Immortals of Meluha* is, in itself, a document of considerable cultural and sociological significance that deserves to be examined with the same analytical attention that the text itself receives. Tripathi's initial difficulty in securing a mainstream publisher for the manuscript was not simply a matter of individual editorial misjudgement or the kind of short-sightedness that characterises apocryphal stories of great manuscripts rejected; it reflected a structural feature of the Indian English-language publishing market as it existed at the beginning of the decade of the 2000s. The industry at that time was organised primarily around two poles: literary fiction addressed to a relatively small English-educated metropolitan minority whose cultural tastes and educational formation oriented them toward the established traditions of Indian English literary fiction, and mass-market vernacular fiction addressed to regional-language readers across the various Indian languages. There existed, within this structure, relatively little institutional provision for a form of English-language popular fiction addressed to the new and rapidly expanding urban middle class that post-liberalisation economic growth had been producing — a middle class that was simultaneously comfortable enough with English to read

fiction in that language and sufficiently distant from the cultural formation of the literary establishment to find its productions forbidding or simply uninteresting. The market segment that Tripathi would subsequently dominate was, in a precise and analytically important sense, a market that did not yet exist in any institutionalised form when he first circulates his manuscript among potential publishers.

The decision to self-publish and to market the novel through digital communities — the email lists, early social networking platforms, and online discussion forums that had by that time been organised around Hindu spirituality and Hindu mythological tradition in their various digital forms — was therefore both a tactical response to immediate institutional rejection and an early and remarkably prescient experiment in a new model of cultural distribution that would, in subsequent years, become widely understood as a standard approach to audience development in the Indian popular publishing market. The success of this early experiment attracted institutional attention of a kind that the experiment itself could not have anticipated. Westland Books, which was at the time backed by the considerable institutional resources of the Times of India Group, recognised in the novel's growing and demonstrably enthusiastic readership not merely a promising title but the first clear evidence of a new and commercially significant market segment, and its acquisition of the publishing rights represented a strategic bet on that segment as a durable commercial opportunity as much as it was a judgement about the particular merits of the novel itself.

This institutional intervention was culturally transformative in ways that went considerably beyond the practical matter of improved distribution through established retail channels. Westland brought to the project a marketing infrastructure of considerable sophistication that was capable of securing the retail placement, media coverage, author event bookings, and bookseller relationship management that self-publication cannot access without the institutional credibility that a recognised publisher confers. It brought the institutional legitimacy that distinguishes, in the perceptions of literary reviewers, prize committees, academic syllabi, and the broader literary culture, a 'real' publisher's title from a self-published one in ways that shapes the cultural reception of a text independently of anything the text itself contains. And it brought, crucially and perhaps most consequentially of all, the capacity to negotiate subsidiary rights across the full range of commercial possibilities: to position the novel not as a one-off publication whose commercial life is circumscribed by the printed page but as the first instalment of a franchise property whose value extends across multiple media — streaming, film, merchandise, digital — and across multiple national and international markets simultaneously. The publishing house, in other words, was not functioning in this case as a mere vehicle for the distribution of a text that already existed in its final form; it was functioning, in Williams's sense, as an active producer of the cultural object that the novel became through the process of its commercial development.

Para-textual Engineering and the Construction of the Reader

Gerard Genette's concept of the Para-text — the surrounding material that frames a text and shapes the conditions and terms of its reception before the reader encounters the text itself — is indispensable for understanding the cultural work performed by Westland's production of *the Shiva Trilogy* as a commercial and cultural object. The Para-textual apparatus of the Westland editions was designed with considerable sophistication and obvious strategic intent to position the novels simultaneously within multiple reading communities whose cultural orientations and reader expectations it needed to address at one and the same time: the consumer of international genre fiction, who is familiar with the

conventions of fantasy and historical fiction in their various commercial forms; the practitioner of Hindu spirituality, who brings devotional commitments and theological expectations to any narrative engagement with the tradition; the reader of historical and alternative history narrative, who values the interplay between documented historical record and narrative invention; and the young urban professional in search of a modern and intellectually respectable cultural idiom adequate to the complexity of their own relationship to Hindu cultural identity in a liberalised and globally integrated India.

The cover design of the Westland editions deserves close critical attention as a document of Para-textual strategy. The imagery deployed across the covers of *the Shiva Trilogy* draws simultaneously and deliberately on two distinct visual vocabularies in a way that is worth analysing with some care: the visual conventions of international fantasy and genre publishing — bold and saturated colour, dramatic chiaroscuro lighting, iconographic visual simplicity that communicates genre identity at a glance across the retail display — and the symbolic lexicon of Hindu iconography, deploying the Rudraksha bead, the Trishul, and the blue-throated visual motif associated with the Neelakantha tradition in ways that is immediately legible to Hindu audiences of varied denominational backgrounds while remaining visually accessible and aesthetically engaging to readers who brings no particular devotional formation to the encounter. The cover design thus resolves, at the level of visual signification and in advance of any encounter with the narrative itself, the central cultural tension between global genre convention and Hindu cultural particularity that the novels themselves attempts to navigate at the level of narrative and philosophical argument.

The author biography as it is presented consistently across all editions and all promotional platforms performs an equally precise and culturally consequential Para-textual work. Tripathi is consistently and invariably presented to his readership as both an IIM Calcutta-educated former investment banker — a professional credential that confers rational, modern, secular intellectual authority of the kind that the educated middle-class reader values — and a devoted Shiva bhakt, a self-description that he employs publicly and that confers spiritual authenticity and devotional sincerity of a kind that a merely academic or literary engagement with the tradition could not supply. This dual positioning mirrors, at the level of authorial self-presentation, the dual mode of address that the novels themselves attempts: the simultaneous address to readers who requires intellectual respectability and discursive seriousness as conditions of their cultural engagement, and to readers who requires devotional legitimacy and spiritual authenticity as conditions of their willingness to engage with a narrative treatment of sacred material. The author biography, understood in this analytical light, is not merely biographical information offered as a courtesy to the curious reader; it is a carefully constructed para-textual argument for the novel's cultural seriousness and legitimacy, addressed simultaneously to two distinct and potentially sceptical readerships.

The Advance System and Its Narrative Consequences

The economics of the publishing advance system produces consequences for narrative form that is rarely acknowledged with the seriousness they deserve in the dominant traditions of literary and cultural analysis, but that are nonetheless real, demonstrable, and analytically significant in the case under examination. When a publisher commits a substantial advance payment to a multi-volume publishing contract — as Westland did for both the *Shiva Trilogy* in its initial form and for the subsequent *Ram Chandra Series* — the author is bound by economic obligation of a contractually enforceable kind to

deliver volumes of a specified character that justifies the initial investment and generates the commercial returns from which the advance can be recouped. This obligation structures narrative decisions in important and often under acknowledged ways that has direct consequences for the cultural form the mythology takes.

The serialised narrative structure of both Tripathi's trilogies — in which each individual volume concludes with a narrative cliff-hanger that is calibrated with considerable precision to ensure the reader's emotional investment in the purchase of the subsequent volume — is not, this paper argues, an aesthetic choice derived from careful study of the conventions and formal principles of the Sanskrit epic tradition from which the mythological material is drawn. It is, rather, a commercial strategy derived directly from the institutional logic of the publishing series as a market form, a logic in which each volume must simultaneously satisfy and frustrate must conclude while also generating the desire for continuation. The Sanskrit epic tradition is, in fact, characterised by narrative digression of considerable elaboration, by the embedding of stories within stories across multiple levels of narrative frame, by genealogical excursus and moral reflection that interrupts and complicates the forward movement of any central narrative, and by a relationship between the human and the divine that is irreducibly multiple rather than reducible to the linear development of a single heroic consciousness. The formal choice to organise and present the mythological material within the conventions of the commercially proven genre series is a market-driven institutional decision, and it produces a version of the Shiva myth that is fundamentally and structurally different from anything that the tradition itself generated or that the tradition's own formal and spiritual logic would have produced. When the *Ram Chandra* Series was subsequently extended beyond its originally projected scope and timeline, this too reflects the market logic of franchise extension and the economic incentive to maximise the commercial exploitation of a proven property, rather than any narrative logic inherent in the mythological material itself.

IV. Digital Platforms, Algorithms, and the Amplification of Myth Community Marketing and the Constitution of a Readership

Tripathi's initial marketing strategy — the targeted and methodical cultivation of online communities organised around Hindu spirituality, Hindu cultural identity, and Hindu mythology across their various early digital platforms — was an early and remarkably prescient instance of what has since become a standard and widely theorised approach to audience development and cultural marketing in the Indian popular publishing market. The strategy was prescient because it recognised a structural feature of the Indian cultural marketplace that the conventional publishing industry of the time had not yet adequately addressed or even clearly perceived: that the potential audience for a modernised and intellectually accessible treatment of Hindu mythology was not constituted by any pre-existing literary readership of the kind that conventional publishers knew how to reach and cultivate, but by communities of cultural and religious identity whose members were increasingly organised on digital platforms and who had, as yet, found no adequate cultural form in the existing literary or popular media landscape for the aspirations, anxieties, and cultural investments they share.

The readers recruited through these early digital community-building exercises was not simply passive consumers of a cultural product that had been prepared for them in advance of their discovery of it; they was, rather, active participants in the on-going construction of that product's cultural meaning and cultural significance. Their online discussions — in which they debate the theological implications of Tripathi's systematic rationalisation of the myth, argues about the accuracy and legitimacy of his

historical reconstructions of the ancient Indian context, and collectively defends the novels against the scepticism and occasional contempt of literary reviewers who approached them from the perspective of literary cultural capital — constituted what Williams would recognise as a structure of feeling in active formation: a shared and emergent sense of cultural identity and cultural belonging for which the novels provided both the occasion and the vocabulary through which it could be articulated and communicated. The novels, in this analytical perspective, did not discover a pre-existing readership waiting to be served; they participated, in an active and constitutive manner, with the digital communities that formed around them, in the collective production of a reading public that had not previously existed in any organised form.

Recommendation Algorithms and the Mythology Market

The recommendation algorithms of the major digital retail platforms through which the novels are sold and accessed — Amazon India and Flipkart in the domestic retail market, and the digital reading ecosystems of Kindle and Google Play Books in the e-book market — operate on the foundational technical principle of collaborative filtering: the purchase and reading behaviour of large numbers of individual readers generates patterns of data from which the algorithm infers correlations, so that readers who had purchased *The Immortals of Meluha* and had also purchased other mythological or spiritually inflected popular fiction titles would generate data that causes the algorithm to recommend those same titles to subsequent buyers of Tripathi's novels. This process of algorithmic recommendation produces what might be described, adapting the ecological metaphor, as a mythology bubble: a self-reinforcing ecosystem of mythologically themed content that becomes progressively more visible, through the mechanism of recommendation, to readers who have already demonstrated an interest in the genre and progressively less visible, by the same mechanism, to those who have not.

The cultural consequences of this algorithmic structure for the broader landscape of Indian popular fiction publishing have been very considerable and in certain respects quite surprising to those who observed them from within the industry. The extraordinary commercial success of *the Shiva Trilogy* was followed, with a characteristic lag of approximately two to three publishing years, by a very significant expansion of mythological fiction as a recognised publishing category in its own right. Titles retelling the stories of Krishna, of Rama and Sita, of Karna and Draupadi, of various figures from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana and the Puranas, multiplied rapidly in the lists of major publishers, many of them produced to recognisably similar formal specifications: the humanisation of divine figures who are rendered as exceptional mortals rather than supernatural beings; the systematic rationalisation of miraculous elements through various theories of advanced ancient civilisation and proto-historical technology; the employment of the hero's journey structure in its Campbellian form as the organising narrative template; and the deployment of contemporary psychological interiority as the primary tool for the renovation of ancient mythological character in ways accessible to modern readers.

The algorithm, in this analysis, did not simply reflect a pre-existing and stable demand for mythological fiction that the success of *the Shiva Trilogy* had merely revealed to a previously inattentive publishing industry; it actively shaped, sustained, and amplified that demand by concentrating commercial visibility on a genre that had become commercially proven and therefore commercially safe. In doing so, the recommendation algorithm was operating as a cultural institution in precisely Williams's analytical sense: not merely distributing cultural content that had been produced elsewhere and for other purposes but actively determining what content is visible to which audiences, what content is amplified through

the mechanism of recommendation into the mainstream commercial consciousness, and, by necessary implication, what content — however intrinsically interesting, culturally significant, or formally innovative it may be — remains commercially invisible because it has not yet generated the purchasing data that would cause the algorithm to notice and promote it.

OTT Platforms and the Adaptation Economy

The acquisition of adaptation rights to Tripathi's mythological universe by over-the-top streaming platforms marks a qualitatively distinct and analytically significant stage in the institutional production of myth as cultural commodity — a stage that requires its own analytical treatment rather than being subsumed within the analysis of the publishing dimension. OTT platforms is not, in any analytically adequate account, merely new distribution channels for pre-existing cultural content that has been produced elsewhere by other institutions; they are, as Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay argued in their important *Television Studies after TV* (2009), new cultural institutions in their own right, with their own commissioning logic, their own production value expectations, their own global distribution reach and competitive imperatives, and their own capacity to actively shape the content they produce and circulate. Their institutional investment in mythological content must be understood within the specific and highly competitive dynamics of the Indian streaming market, where the race for original Indian-language and English-language content has made cultural properties with built-in narrative recognition — the kind of recognition that attaches, in the Indian cultural context, to the figures of Shiva and Rama and the broader mythological universe — and broad audience identification particularly attractive as commissioning targets for platforms seeking to establish a distinctive and defensible content positioning.

The decisions involved in adapting mythological fiction for the streaming platform — the specific visual aesthetic to be adopted, the casting choices that simultaneously address devotional expectations and commercial casting logic, the management of the relationship between the devotional and the dramatic in a medium that values spectacle and interpersonal conflict, the calibration of fidelity to the source text against the formal demands of serialised screen narrative — is not artistic decision made in a cultural vacuum by creative agents who are answerable only to the demands of the mythological tradition and their own artistic conscience. They are commercial decisions, made within institutional constraints, that reflects the platform's assessment of its audience demographics and the preferences that those demographics are likely to bring to the content; its competitive positioning relative to other platforms competing for the same audience; and its reading of the regulatory and political environment within which it operates and to which it must remain commercially sensitive. Each of these institutional decisions transforms the mythological material in specific and analytically documentable ways: the demands of visual spectacle in the streaming format pushes the myth toward the epic and the martial at the expense of the philosophical and the contemplative; the demands of serialised dramatic structure pushes it toward romantic and interpersonal conflict of the kind that generates the individual episode's cliff-hanger; and the demands of a global distribution platform pushes it towards a visual and narrative idiom that is legible and accessible to audiences who may have no prior cultural acquaintance with the Hindu tradition whatsoever. The platform, in producing the myth for the screen, inevitably and necessarily produces a different myth.

V. Market Logic, Narrative Form, and Ideological Content The Rationalisation of the Sacred

The most analytically significant formal feature of Tripathi's mythological fiction, the feature that most clearly reveals the relationship between market logic and narrative form in his work, is the systematic rationalisation of the supernatural that the novels undertake throughout their narrative length. Across both the *Shiva Trilogy* and the *Ram Chandra Series*, the miraculous and the supernaturally extraordinary elements of the traditional mythological narratives — the divine interventions, the supernatural weapons of cosmic destructive power, the yogic and celestial abilities of the divine figures — is given explanations that is rooted in theories of advanced ancient civilisation, proto-historical technology of various kinds, and processes that are implicitly chemical or biological in their underlying mechanism even when they is not explicitly described in those terms. Gods becomes exceptional mortals whose exceptionality lies in moral courage and practical wisdom rather than supernatural endowment; myth becomes historical allegories encoding the memory of actual events in an actual ancient society; the miraculous becomes the technologically sophisticated and the scientifically possible. The novels presents this rationalisation, through the philosophical discussions of their characters, as a spiritual insight of considerable depth: the recognition that the true source of Shiva's or Rama's greatness lies not in supernatural endowment bestowed from outside but in human courage, moral seriousness, and the willingness to bears the weight of choices made in full awareness of their consequences.

This formal choice, however significant its apparent spiritual content, is simultaneously and inseparably a market calculation of considerable precision. By systematically rationalising the myth and removing the requirement that readers accepts the supernatural on its own terms, Tripathi makes his novels accessible to a readership that might be resistant to the kind of uncritical supernaturalism that more conventionally devotional treatments of the mythological tradition tends to require — readers formed by secular education, scientific rationalism, and a broadly empiricist orientation toward the world who nonetheless seeks a meaningful, serious, and culturally affirming engagement with their Hindu cultural heritage. The rationalised myth, as Tripathi constructs it, offers a culturally productive resolution to the tension — widely experienced among post-liberalisation urban Hindus of the educated professional class — between a modern, scientifically inflected worldview and the devotional and mythological traditions in which they were raised and to which they retains a complex emotional and cultural attachment. This is a resolution that is calibrated, with considerable market sophistication, to serves a specific and commercially significant market segment, and it would not have takes quite this particular form — and might not have been pursued at all — without the commercial imperative to reaches and satisfies that segment.

The cultural consequence of this rationalisation for the meaning and social function of the myth is, this paper argues, more profound than is generally acknowledged in the popular reception of Tripathi's work. The traditional mythological accounts of Shiva in the Puranic tradition and the devotional literature is not primarily stories about an exceptional human being whose moral qualities earns him a divine status that he was not born to possess; they is, at their most fundamental level, theological accounts of the nature of the divine as Hinduism understands it, devotional invitations to a particular quality of spiritual relationship, and philosophical arguments about the relationship between cosmic and personal dimensions of existence that cannot be reduced to the psychological individualism of the hero narrative. By recasting the Shiva myth as the story of an exceptional mortal's moral self-discovery, Tripathi's fiction does not merely retells the myth in a contemporary idiom; it produces a categorically different cultural object whose relationship to the tradition it claims to interprets is mediated, at every point in its construction, by the requirements and the logics of the commercial market within which it is produced.

Genre Convention and the Sanskrit Tradition

The structural narrative template that Tripathi employs across both his trilogies deserves scrutiny as a further and particularly revealing instance of market-driven formal choice. The narrative architecture of *the Shiva Trilogy* follows, with fidelity sufficient to be analytically significant, the mono-myth structure which Joseph Campbell articulated in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and which was subsequently institutionalised, through the widespread influence of Hollywood screenwriting manuals, genre fiction workshops, and popular creative writing pedagogy, as a standard and commercially proven template for popular narrative in its various international forms: the hero is called from the familiar conditions of ordinary life to an extraordinary destiny whose implications he cannot initially comprehend; he undergoes a series of increasingly severe trials that tests and develops his physical, moral, and intellectual capacities; he confronts an ultimate challenge that reveals his true nature to himself and to those around him; and he transforms both himself and the world he inhabits through the quality of his engagement with that challenge. This structure is so deeply and pervasively embedded in the international conventions of genre fiction and commercial cinema that its deployment by Tripathi may be in significant part a matter of absorbed convention rather than deliberate and reflective formal choice.

What is analytically significant is the considerable and structurally important distance between this international popular narrative template and the narrative structures that is actually characteristic of the Sanskrit epic and Puranic tradition from which the Shiva myth and the Rama myth derives their cultural authority. The Mahabharata and the Puranas — the primary sources of the mythological material that Tripathi's novels works with and transforms — is not organised around a single protagonist's linear psychological journey toward self-realisation as the defining narrative structure. They are characterised, rather, by narrative digression of elaborate and extensive kind, by the embedding of stories within stories across multiple levels of narrative frame, by the proliferation of genealogical narrative and moral philosophical reflection that complicates and interrupts any forward momentum, and by a cosmological understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine that cannot be reduced to the psychological individualism of the hero's inner journey. The Sanskrit tradition understands myth as cosmological rather than primarily psychological, as communal and polyphonic rather than individually focused, and as devotional in its primary social function rather than entertainment. To impose the Campbell template on this material is to produce a version of the myth that is shaped not by the formal and spiritual logic of the tradition itself but by the formal conventions of the global popular fiction market, a version in which the tradition has been rendered commensurable with international genre convention at the cost of much of what is most distinctively and irreducibly its own.

Ideology, Class, and the Hindu Cultural Revival

The political and ideological dimensions of the mythological fiction boom that Tripathi's success inaugurated requires careful and nuanced analytical treatment that avoids both the reductive identification of the fiction with a crude nationalist project and the naive insistence on its political innocence. The resurgence of mythological content across Indian popular media — television serials, Bollywood films, popular fiction, and digital content of various kinds — has coincided, with a historical correlation too consistent to be entirely coincidental, with the rise of Hindu cultural nationalism as an

increasingly dominant force in Indian public life across the period from the early 2010s to the present. The relationship between these two cultural and political phenomena is, it must be said, neither simple nor unidirectional, and it would be both analytically crude and empirically inaccurate to read Tripathi's novels as mere instruments of nationalist ideology in any directly propositional sense: the novels are explicitly pluralist and syncretic in their stated philosophical commitments, and their author has publicly distanced himself from certain specific aspects of Hindutva politics on numerous occasions.

Nevertheless, the cultural work which is performed by these novels in reinforcing the prestige, the modernity, and the intellectual legitimacy of the Hindu mythological tradition in the eyes of its educated urban readership cannot be analytically separated from the broader political context within which they are produced and consumed. By positioning Hindu mythology as sophisticated intellectual content worthy of serious adult engagement by educated professional readers — as a tradition with philosophical depth and civilizational richness comparable to the canonical traditions of Western thought — the novels participate in what might be described as the project of Hindu modernism: the construction of a confident, globally legible, intellectually respectable Hindu cultural identity capable of holding its own in the cultural marketplace of a liberalised, internationally integrated, and rapidly modernising India. The publishing industry and the digital platforms are not merely peripheral beneficiaries of this project; they are structural participants in it, not primarily because their individual agents share its ideological commitments — though some clearly do — but because the market demographics of post-liberalisation India makes the aspirational Hindu middle class the dominant consumer group whose cultural preferences shape, through the mechanism of market pressure, what gets produced, promoted, and amplified across the cultural field. The alignment between commercial interest and Hindu cultural nationalism is, in significant part, a structural feature of the cultural marketplace rather than a matter of deliberate political intention on the part of any individual agent operating within it.

VI. Production Conditions as Cultural Analysis: A Methodological Case

The analysis that has been developed across the preceding sections of this paper rests on a methodological commitment that requires explicit articulation and defence precisely because it runs against the dominant tendencies of both conventional literary criticism and much contemporary cultural studies. The dominant methods of literary and cultural criticism remain, even in a theoretically sophisticated contemporary academy, primarily and in most practical instances text-centred in their orientation and their methodological commitments: they attend primarily to what texts mean when they are read — to the narrative structures and character constructions and ideological propositions that the text presents to its readers — rather than to the production conditions through which those texts came to be the objects they are. This text-centrism has genuine and significant virtues that must be acknowledged: it preserves the analytical specificity of the cultural object and resists the crude reductionism that treats cultural texts as mere symptoms of extra-textual economic forces whose logic determines their content in any direct and straightforward way. But it also has significant limitations when it is applied to the analysis of popular fiction produced within the institutional conditions of contemporary cultural capitalism, limitations that become most clearly visible when the analytical object is as commercially and institutionally produced as Tripathi's mythological fiction.

A production-centred methodology, as this paper has attempted to apply it, does not replace textual analysis or render it analytically obsolete; it contextualises and supplements textual analysis in ways that makes visible dimensions of the cultural object that text-centred analysis cannot adequately

accounts for. When the analyst knows that *The Immortals of Meluha* was initially self-published and marketed through Hindu digital communities before being acquired by a conglomerate publisher with a specific commercial strategy for its development, they are equipped to understand — in ways that reading the text alone could not have makes possible — why it takes the particular form it does, why it addresses the readership it addresses in the specific manner it does, and why it carries the cultural meanings it carries rather than other meanings that the mythological material might equally have supported. When the analyst knows that the advance system and the franchise logic of contemporary publishing structures the serialised form of both Tripathi's trilogies at the level of institutional economic logic, they are better equipped to understand why those trilogies is organised as they are and why their narrative conclusions takes the shape they takes. When the analyst knows that recommendation algorithms concentrates commercial visibility on proven genre formulas and amplifies the success of the commercially proven at the expense of the novel and the experimental, they is better equipped to understand why a substantial wave of formally similar mythological fiction followed the commercial success of *the Shiva Trilogy* rather than a more formally diverse range of engagements with the mythological tradition.

This methodology is also and perhaps most importantly, better equipped to ask and to begins to answer the political questions that a purely textual analysis tends systematically to suppress or to defer. Whose interests are served by the particular version of Hindu mythology that the contemporary publishing industry produces, promotes, and amplifies through its institutional apparatus? What versions of the tradition — formally more complex, theologically more demanding, culturally more marginal, or politically less aligned with the interests of the dominant commercial readership — is being marginalised or rendered culturally invisible by the market logic that governs cultural production in this field? What is the relationship between the commodification of myth as a genre category and the political uses to which mythology is being put in contemporary Indian public life? These are not questions that can be adequately addressed by close reading of Tripathi's texts alone, however careful and theoretically informed that reading might be; they require the kind of institutional and structural analysis for which Williams, Bourdieu, and Thompson provides the most rigorous and methodologically developed analytical tools available in the scholarly literature.

VII. Conclusion: Towards a Political Economy of Popular Mythology

Amish Tripathi's mythological fiction constitutes, by any reasonable assessment, a major cultural phenomenon of contemporary India, and the scale and social significance of its success demands serious, sustained, and methodologically sophisticated analytical attention from scholars who are interested in understanding how culture is produced and consumed in a post-liberalisation society. But the terms of that analytical attention is, this paper has argued, consequential for the quality and the completeness of the understanding that analysis can achieve. If we approaches the *Shiva Trilogy* and the *Ram Chandra Series* purely as literary texts whose significance is determined by what they says — asking whether they achieves the critical standards of canonical fiction, whether they is faithful to the Sanskrit sources from which they draws, whether their theology is orthodox or heterodox by the standards of the traditions they claims to interprets — we will misses what is most culturally significant about them as social and historical phenomena: the fact that they is products of a specific and historically novel system of cultural production in which publishers, digital retail platforms, algorithmic recommendation systems, and cross-media marketing operations is active agents in the making of cultural meaning whose

contributions to the final cultural object is no less real and no less determinative for being less visible than the author's own.

Raymond Williams's theoretical insistence that institutions is cultural producers — that the conditions of production is internal to cultural meaning rather than merely external to it, that what gets made and how it gets made and who it gets made for is not context but content — remains the most important and the most methodologically productive single theoretical resource for this analysis. In the contemporary Indian cultural marketplace, myth is not simply retold by individual authors who brings their literary talents and their cultural knowledge to bear on traditional material; it is re-engineered through the institutional apparatus of the publishing conglomerate and the digital platform, shaped by the advance economics of the contractual system and the recommendation logic of the retail algorithm, constrained and directed by the commissioning priorities of the streaming platform and the competitive dynamics of the digital media economy, and ultimately oriented toward the cultural and political sociology of the Hindu middle class that constitutes its primary audience and the market demographics of post-liberalisation India that defines the commercial parameters within which all these institutional decisions is made. The result is a version of Hindu mythology that is modern in its idiom, accessible to secular education, psychologically individualistic in its construction of character and agency, formally linear in its narrative structure, and commercially optimised across the full range of its production and distribution: a mythology that is calibrated, at every level, to serves the intersecting demands of the market, the aspirational middle-class reader, and the cultural and political moment in which it is produced.

To understand this process with analytical clarity is not to reduces Tripathi's fiction to a mere commodity, nor to denies the genuine cultural energy and the authentic spiritual aspiration that animates it and that explains the deep emotional investment of its millions of readers across the country and beyond. It is, rather, to insists — against the tendency of both popular reverence and conventional literary criticism to treats the text as an autonomous cultural object — that a complete and analytically adequate account of what this fiction means and does in the world must includes an account of how it is made, by whom, within what institutional constraints, under what commercial conditions, and in whose interests. That insistence is the methodological legacy of Raymond Williams as it is most usefully understood, and it remains as urgent and as analytically productive in the study of contemporary Indian popular fiction as it was in the study of the British working-class culture from which he first derived and tested the analytical tools he leaves to his successors.

What the example of Tripathi's mythological fiction ultimately demonstrates with a clarity that makes it an unusually instructive case study is that the sacred and the commercial is not, in the cultural economy of contemporary India, the opposites that a certain kind of cultural idealism would prefer them to be; they is deeply, structurally, and perhaps irreversibly entangled in ways that shapes the sacred as much as the commercial. Myth enters the market; the market shapes the myth in its own image; and the shaped myth returns to the culture as the mythology that the new generation of urban Hindus knows and identifies with. The publishing house, the streaming platform, and the recommendation algorithm becomes, in Williams's carefully chosen sense, cultural producers — not merely of popular entertainment consumed and forgotten but of the mythological imagination itself, of the versions of Shiva and Rama and the cosmological tradition that will be carries forward into the cultural memory of a new India. Any scholarship that aspires to understand that imagination must be equipped to reads not

only the texts it produces but the institutions, the markets, and the political economies through which those texts comes to be.

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