

The Neo-Liberal Myth: How Modern Indian English Fiction Repackages Ancient Wisdom as Management Tools and Self-Help Guides: A Comparative Reading of Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Gita* and Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy*

Mr. Neki Ram Bijarnia¹, Prof. Jyoti Kumar Verma²

¹Research Scholar, English, Dayalbagh Educational Institute, Agra

²Supervisor, HOD, Deptt of English, Dayalbagh Educational Institute, Agra

Abstract

Contemporary Indian English literature has increasingly returned to Hindu mythology, not simply to preserve ancient narratives but to reinterpret them for the needs of the modern reader. Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Gita: A Commentary on the Bhagavad Gita* and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*—*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*—are prominent examples of this cultural and literary tendency. Although the two authors employ different genres and narrative methods, both transform mythological knowledge into a practical discourse of individual action, leadership, ethical choice, crisis management, social organization, and personal transformation.

This paper examines how ancient wisdom is repackaged within the language of contemporary self-help and management culture. It argues that Pattanaik's interpretive commentary converts the *Bhagavad Gita* into a guide for decision-making and organizational behaviour, while Tripathi's fictional universe translates myth into a narrative of leadership, governance, innovation, crisis resolution, and institutional reform. The paper uses the term “neo-liberal myth” not to suggest that either author simply endorses market ideology, but to describe the process through which mythological values are reorganized around the modern individual: self-motivated, ethically responsible, adaptable, productive, and capable of managing uncertainty.

At the same time, these works do not merely reduce mythology to corporate advice. They preserve elements of dharma, pluralism, sacrifice, ecological responsibility, collective welfare, and the critique of absolutist power. Their significance lies in this contradiction: they challenge modern alienation through ancient philosophy, yet often express that philosophy through the vocabulary of individual performance and self-management. The comparison demonstrates how Indian mythological fiction participates in the commercialization, democratization, and ideological transformation of sacred knowledge.

Keywords: neo-liberalism, Hindu mythology, self-help, management, Devdutt Pattanaik, Amish Tripathi, *My Gita*, *Shiva Trilogy*, dharma, popular fiction

Introduction

The contemporary popularity of Hindu mythological fiction in English marks an important development in

Indian literary culture. Writers such as Devdutt Pattanaik and Amish Tripathi have brought the *Mahabharata*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Ramayana*, and the myths of Shiva into the domain of mass-market publishing. Their works are read not only as literary retellings but also as sources of ethical instruction, personal inspiration, political reflection, and practical wisdom. Their success reveals a changing relationship between mythology and modernity: ancient stories are no longer confined to ritual, religious commentary, or academic interpretation. They circulate through bookstores, corporate seminars, social media, leadership programmes, motivational speeches, and popular culture.

Pattanaik and Tripathi occupy different positions within this literary field. Pattanaik is primarily an interpreter, commentator, illustrator, and mythologist. In *My Gita*, he offers a contemporary reading of the *Bhagavad Gita*, emphasizing the relationship between action, desire, duty, perspective, and responsibility. His writing is explanatory and aphoristic, and it frequently translates complex philosophical ideas into accessible reflections relevant to everyday life. Critical discussions of Pattanaik's work note his tendency to combine traditional symbols with contemporary interpretations of identity, morality, and human behaviour. (Oli and Verma 466)

Tripathi, in contrast, is a novelist who converts myth into a fast-paced fictional narrative. The Shiva Trilogy presents Shiva not as an eternally divine figure but as a human leader who becomes associated with divinity through action, moral courage, and historical circumstance. Tripathi's fiction employs adventure, romance, political intrigue, scientific speculation, warfare, and suspense. Scholarship on the trilogy has identified historical rationalization, philosophical reinterpretation, cinematic pacing, and modern storytelling as central to his method. The trilogy therefore functions as both a mythological narrative and a political-management allegory. (Deshmukh and Dwivedi 148)

This paper proposes that both writers participate in a broader process of **practicalizing mythology**. They take concepts traditionally associated with spiritual liberation and reinterpret them as instruments for living successfully in a complex modern world. Dharma becomes a principle of responsible decision-making; karma becomes a theory of consequences; detachment becomes emotional discipline; leadership becomes service; and the mythological hero becomes an ideal of self-development.

The term "neo-liberal" requires clarification. Neoliberalism is not merely economic liberalization. It also describes a cultural logic that emphasizes individual responsibility, competition, flexibility, self-motivation, productivity, and continuous self-improvement. Wendy Brown, for instance, describes neoliberalism as a political and economic rationality that extends market values into diverse areas of human life. In the workplace, this logic often encourages individuals to manage their own careers, motivation, performance, and professional advancement. A recent study of mythological writing and post-liberalization Indian English literature similarly examines how mythology is transformed into a guidebook for the contemporary workspace and individual life. (Sharma 41; Upadhya 24)

The central argument of this paper is that *My Gita* and the Shiva Trilogy convert mythology into a form of cultural technology. They provide models for how individuals and communities should act under conditions of uncertainty. Yet the two works also complicate a purely celebratory interpretation. Their ethical systems cannot be reduced entirely to market values because they retain commitments to social duty, sacrifice, ecological balance, pluralism, and collective welfare. The "neo-liberal myth," therefore, is an ambivalent formation: it is both a self-help discourse and a site where the limits of self-help are exposed.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual and comparative analysis. It reads Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Gita* along-

gside Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy as primary texts and places them in dialogue with scholarship on neoliberalism, contemporary Indian mythological fiction, leadership, and cultural representation. The analysis focuses on recurring concepts—dharma, karma, detachment, leadership, merit, technological development, collective welfare, and self-management—to examine how mythic ideas are translated into contemporary practical and managerial vocabularies. The study is interpretive rather than empirical; its claims are based on close reading and comparison of the selected texts and verified secondary sources.

Mythology and the Contemporary Self

Traditional mythology generally addresses questions larger than individual success. It explains the relationship between human beings, gods, nature, society, time, death, and cosmic order. Its central concerns are not necessarily productivity or career advancement but dharma, liberation, sacrifice, justice, devotion, and the relationship between the individual self and the larger order of existence.

Modern popular culture, however, often relocates these questions within the sphere of the individual. The reader approaches mythology with contemporary concerns: How should I make difficult decisions? How can I become a good leader? How can I control fear and anxiety? How should I respond to failure? What does it mean to act ethically in a competitive environment? The mythological text is consequently expected to provide usable knowledge.

This process is visible in the marketing and reception of contemporary Indian mythological literature. A sacred narrative becomes a source of “lessons,” “principles,” “strategies,” and “insights.” Krishna may be read as a mentor, Shiva as a transformational leader, and the battlefield as a metaphor for organizational conflict. Such readings make mythology accessible, but they also alter its structure. The sacred is translated into the language of utility.

Pattanaik's *My Gita* is especially significant because it openly works as a commentary. The *Gita* is approached as a dialogue about action and responsibility, but the dialogue also becomes a guide for negotiating modern dilemmas. Pattanaik's method is not a conventional theological commentary. Instead, he presents the text as a flexible philosophical resource whose meaning changes according to the reader's perspective. His interpretive framework makes the *Gita* available to readers who may not approach it through traditional Sanskrit scholarship or devotional practice.

Tripathi's fiction undertakes a similar transformation through storytelling. Instead of presenting doctrines directly, the Shiva Trilogy dramatizes them through political and personal crises. Shiva must make decisions concerning war, justice, technology, social reform, and the treatment of marginalized communities. The reader learns through plot, conflict, dialogue, and character development. Myth becomes an experiential management manual: the reader observes how a leader confronts uncertainty, receives counsel, makes mistakes, and revises decisions.

My Gita and the Management of Action

The central principle of the *Bhagavad Gita* is the problem of action. Arjuna's crisis arises because action is morally complicated. He is not merely afraid of battle; he is unable to reconcile personal attachment, family loyalty, social duty, and political responsibility. Krishna's response is not a simple command to obey authority. It is an attempt to transform Arjuna's understanding of action, selfhood, desire, and consequence. In *My Gita*, this philosophical problem becomes particularly relevant to the modern subject. The individual is placed in situations where there is no perfectly pure choice. Professional life, political life, family life,

and social life require decisions under conditions of incomplete knowledge. Pattanaik's reading makes the *Gita* useful for these circumstances by stressing perspective and responsibility.

The first management-oriented transformation occurs through the concept of **dharma**. In a traditional context, dharma can refer to cosmic order, ethical law, social duty, religious obligation, or the conduct appropriate to a particular situation. In a modern self-help framework, it can become a personal mission or role-based responsibility. The question "What is my dharma?" is reinterpreted as "What is my responsibility in this situation?" This translation allows the reader to view professional and personal dilemmas as ethical challenges rather than merely as problems of success and failure.

The second transformation concerns **detachment**. The *Gita* does not recommend indifference; it distinguishes between responsible action and obsessive attachment to results. In corporate and self-help discourse, this idea is often presented as emotional resilience. The individual must work intensely while remaining psychologically prepared for uncertain outcomes. Detachment thus resembles the modern ideal of the adaptable professional who does not collapse when plans fail.

Such a reading can be empowering. It discourages paralysis and encourages action. It also challenges the consumerist desire for guaranteed results. However, it may simultaneously shift responsibility away from institutions and onto individuals. If success depends on one's mindset, discipline, and ability to act without anxiety, social and economic inequalities risk disappearing from the analysis. Structural problems become personal challenges, and institutional injustice becomes a test of individual resilience.

The third transformation is the interpretation of **karma** as consequence. Action produces effects, but the effects may not be immediate or predictable. In management language, this resembles strategic thinking and long-term accountability. Decisions must be judged not only by immediate reward but by their wider consequences. This principle can resist short-term profit-making, especially when it is linked to social and ecological responsibility.

Pattanaik's work is not therefore reducible to corporate instrumentalism. His broader approach emphasizes the plurality of Indian myths and the importance of perspective. The individual is encouraged to understand that different people inhabit different worlds of meaning. This pluralism can challenge the universalizing tendencies of management culture, which often assumes that one model of efficiency or leadership applies everywhere. Yet the paradox remains that the reader is still asked to convert plural philosophical insight into personal competence.

The Shiva Trilogy and Leadership as Myth

The Shiva Trilogy offers a narrative version of this practicalization of mythology. Its most striking intervention is the humanization of Shiva. Shiva is presented as a historical figure who acquires divine status through his actions and moral significance. This transformation brings divinity close to the modern ideal of leadership: greatness is not inherited but earned through courage, judgment, sacrifice, and service.

The trilogy constructs Shiva as a leader who must manage a complex civilization. Meluha is technologically advanced and politically organized, yet its systems contain violence and exclusion. The Somras, a powerful substance associated with health, longevity, and prosperity, represents the technological promise of development. But its production also generates environmental destruction and social inequality. A recent analysis reads the Somras-industrial complex as a metaphor for capitalist enterprises that present themselves as progress while producing ecological and social damage. ^(Karthic 66–74)

This is one of the trilogy's most important neo-liberal tensions. Development is necessary, but development without ethical accountability becomes destructive. Scientific achievement cannot be separated from

questions of distribution, sustainability, and social justice. The trilogy therefore stages an argument about responsible innovation. Technology is neither automatically good nor automatically evil; its value depends upon the social order in which it operates.

Shiva's leadership is also based on **decision-making under uncertainty**. He does not possess complete knowledge. He is often forced to choose between competing ethical claims. He must decide whether enemies are inherently evil, whether violence can be justified, whether institutions deserve loyalty, and whether inherited social systems should be preserved or changed. His leadership consequently resembles the idealized executive or political reformer who must make difficult choices while remaining open to correction.

The trilogy's treatment of evil further supports this interpretation. Evil is frequently represented not as an absolute metaphysical substance but as imbalance. This ethical naturalism transforms the mythological conflict between good and evil into a debate about social systems, political structures, and technological consequences. Recent criticism describes Tripathi's fiction as combining rationalist world-building, ethical naturalism, meritocratic imagination, and cultural nationalism. ^(Oliveira 44–58)

The language of meritocracy is especially important. If Shiva becomes divine through action rather than birth, the narrative appears to affirm the possibility of social mobility. Character, achievement, and public service become more important than inherited status. This can function as a critique of rigid hierarchy. At the same time, meritocracy is also a central neo-liberal value: the belief that individuals rise through talent, effort, and performance.

The trilogy complicates this belief by showing that individuals do not act in isolation. Shiva's achievements depend upon alliances, advisers, soldiers, communities, and institutions. Leadership is collective even when the narrative is organized around a heroic central figure. The novels therefore oscillate between the individual leader and the social world that enables leadership. This tension prevents the trilogy from becoming a simple celebration of entrepreneurial individualism.

From Spiritual Wisdom to Self-Help

Both Pattanaik and Tripathi make ancient wisdom accessible by translating it into familiar modern forms. Their writing avoids the distance that many readers associate with classical texts. Concepts are explained through examples, analogies, contemporary language, and psychologically recognizable conflicts.

This accessibility is one reason for their popularity. Scholarship on these authors observes that Pattanaik approaches mythology through philosophical and symbolic interpretation, while Tripathi uses modern fictional narrative to engage readers emotionally and imaginatively. Both authors democratize ancient myths for twenty-first-century audiences. ^(Oli and Verma 466)

Yet democratization and commodification can occur together. A myth becomes more available, but it also becomes a product. The reader purchases not only a story or interpretation but a promise of transformation. The book suggests that ancient knowledge can improve one's conduct, leadership, emotional stability, or understanding of society.

In *My Gita*, the reader is invited to adopt a disciplined relationship to action. In the Shiva Trilogy, the reader encounters a hero who converts crisis into social and moral purpose. The implicit message is that one should become more courageous, adaptable, rational, and responsible. This is the grammar of self-help, even when it is expressed through the language of dharma and mythology.

The self-help form has two contradictory effects. First, it reduces the distance between sacred knowledge and ordinary life. Mythology becomes relevant to office workers, students, entrepreneurs, administrators,

and urban professionals. Second, it risks reducing philosophical traditions to motivational slogans. The difficulty of the *Gita*—its tensions concerning violence, renunciation, caste, duty, and liberation—can be softened when it is treated primarily as a guide to performance.

A similar reduction can occur in Tripathi's fiction when political and ethical conflicts are interpreted only as leadership lessons. The Somras episode, for example, is not merely about responsible corporate innovation. It also concerns the limits of technocracy, the relationship between knowledge and power, and the violence concealed by civilizational narratives of progress.

The Individual and the Collective

The neo-liberal subject is often imagined as a self-managing individual. This person is expected to cultivate skills, control emotions, accept responsibility, adapt to uncertainty, and continuously improve. Both *My Gita* and the *Shiva Trilogy* produce versions of this subject, but neither fully accepts the idea that individual transformation is sufficient.

The *Gita* begins with a personal crisis, but Krishna's teaching ultimately places Arjuna within a network of social and cosmic relationships. His action affects family, community, political order, and the future. Action is not simply a personal career decision. It has consequences for the world.

Similarly, Shiva's story is not only about personal growth. His decisions reshape entire communities. The trilogy repeatedly asks what happens when rulers prioritize purity, order, or progress over human welfare. The leader must therefore be evaluated by the consequences of governance, not merely by personal charisma.

This is where the two authors move beyond conventional management discourse. Management manuals often define success through organizational performance, measurable outcomes, or competitive advantage. The mythological texts examined here retain broader ethical questions. What kind of society is being produced? Who benefits from development? Who is excluded? What is the cost of order? Can peace be achieved through violence? What responsibilities do the powerful have toward the vulnerable?

Nevertheless, the collective is often represented through the figure of the exceptional individual. Krishna instructs Arjuna; Shiva becomes the agent of transformation. This narrative structure may unintentionally reinforce the belief that social change requires a visionary leader rather than democratic participation. The mythology of the saviour can thus coexist with the managerial ideal of the charismatic reformer.

Rationalization, Science, and the Modern Myth

One of Tripathi's most distinctive techniques is the rationalization of myth. Extraordinary events are frequently explained through historical, scientific, or technological speculation. The gods become advanced human beings; supernatural powers are associated with knowledge, medicine, or technology; sacred events are relocated within a historical world.

This technique makes mythology compatible with modern rationality. It allows readers who may resist literal supernatural belief to enjoy mythological narratives without abandoning scientific thinking. The result is a hybrid world in which mythology and science support each other.

However, rationalization also changes the meaning of myth. Myth is no longer necessarily a sacred story whose truth depends upon ritual or faith. It becomes a coded account of ancient history, lost technology, political memory, or symbolic psychology. This approach can challenge colonial assumptions that Indian mythology is irrational, but it may also reproduce the desire to prove that ancient Indians already possessed modern scientific knowledge.

The relationship between rationality and mythology is equally important in management culture. Contemporary organizations celebrate data, innovation, efficiency, and evidence-based decision-making. Tripathi's rationalized myths make the ancient world appear technologically sophisticated and intellectually modern. The past becomes valuable because it can be translated into the language of science and innovation. Pattanaik's method differs. Instead of explaining myth through proto-science, he often emphasizes symbols, patterns, contrasting worldviews, and cultural interpretation. His approach preserves ambiguity more effectively than a purely rationalist reconstruction. Yet it too makes mythology functional by presenting it as a system for understanding human behaviour.

National Culture and Civilizational Identity

The repackaging of mythology also participates in debates about Indian identity. Contemporary mythological fiction frequently presents Hindu thought as a flexible, plural, ethical, and civilizational worldview. A recent study identifies a broader discourse in which writers including Tripathi and Pattanaik represent India and Hinduism through what it calls "Hindutopia," a vision that abstracts Hindu culture from historical complexity and presents it as the basis of India's distinctive virtues. ^(Oliveira 44-58)

This does not mean that all mythological fiction is identical to political Hindutva. Pattanaik often foregrounds plurality and interpretive multiplicity, while Tripathi presents Hindu civilizational ideas as compatible with reason, pluralism, and modern governance. Yet both contribute to a cultural process in which mythology becomes central to imagining the nation.

The self-help dimension strengthens this process. Ancient Indian wisdom is presented as a resource that can make individuals and institutions more ethical, effective, and successful. The nation too can be imagined as a civilizational subject that must rediscover its inherited knowledge in order to modernize. The past becomes a management resource for the future.

This formulation contains a contradiction. The mythology of India is presented as plural and open-ended, but it may also establish a dominant Hindu framework as the authentic national culture. Marginal, regional, non-Hindu, and dissenting histories may be included only when they support the larger civilizational narrative. The very multiplicity celebrated by mythological retellings can therefore coexist with new hierarchies of cultural legitimacy.

Conclusion

Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Gita* and Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* demonstrate how contemporary Indian English fiction transforms ancient mythology into a modern technology of selfhood. Pattanaik translates the *Bhagavad Gita* into a philosophical guide to action, perspective, responsibility, and emotional discipline. Tripathi turns Shiva into a humanized leader whose journey involves governance, innovation, social reform, ethical conflict, and institutional transformation.

Both writers repackage ancient wisdom as usable knowledge. Dharma becomes responsible action; karma becomes consequence; detachment becomes resilience; mythological leadership becomes a model for professional and political conduct. In this sense, their works participate in the formation of a neo-liberal myth: a cultural narrative in which individuals are expected to manage themselves, overcome uncertainty, improve continuously, and transform crisis into opportunity.

However, these texts cannot be dismissed as simple corporate self-help. They also question the consequences of unchecked development, technological power, social exclusion, absolutist authority, and morally empty ambition. The *Shiva Trilogy's* treatment of the Somras challenges the idea that progress is

automatically beneficial. *My Gita* preserves the ethical difficulty of action instead of reducing it entirely to success. Both works insist that leadership must be judged by its consequences for the larger community. Their importance, therefore, lies in their ambivalence. They make sacred knowledge available to modern readers but subject it to the demands of the marketplace. They challenge inherited interpretations but participate in new cultural hierarchies. They promote individual agency but also acknowledge collective responsibility. They democratize mythology while converting it into a commodity of personal and national improvement.

The neo-liberal myth is consequently not a complete replacement of ancient wisdom. It is a selective reconstruction of that wisdom. It retains those elements most useful to the contemporary subject—action, discipline, adaptability, leadership, and self-knowledge—while often displacing questions of renunciation, structural inequality, ritual authority, and liberation. Reading Pattanaik and Tripathi together makes this process visible. Their works show that modern Indian mythological fiction is not merely retelling the past; it is negotiating the demands of a rapidly changing present and asking what ancient stories can still do in an age of markets, management, technology, and self-fashioning.

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