

**REINCARNATION OF MYTHS AS HISTORY AND SCIENCE:
AN EXPLORATION OF THE USE OF MYTHOLOGY IN
SELECT TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION**

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Declaration

I, **Shemin K.**, hereby declare that the work presented in the thesis entitled **Reincarnation of Myths as History and Science: An Exploration of the Use of Mythology in Select Twenty-First Century Indian English Fiction**, is based on the original work done by me, under the guidance of **Dr. Aysha Swapna K. A.**, Professor, Postgraduate and Research Department of English, Farook College (Autonomous), Kozhikode and has not been included in any other thesis submitted previously for the award of any degree. The contents of the thesis have undergone plagiarism check using iThenticate software at C.H.M.K. Library, University of Calicut, and the similarity index found within the permissible limit. I also declare that the thesis is free from AI generated contents.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis entitled, **Reincarnation of Myths as History and Science: An Exploration of the Use of Mythology in Select Twenty-First Century Indian English Fiction**, submitted by **Ms. Shemin K.**, to the University of Calicut for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English, is an original record of observations and bona fide research, carried out by her, under my supervision, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree or diploma or similar titles.

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Abstract

Mythological fiction has always been an integral genre of Indian English literature. The renarration and reinterpretation of myths in mythological fiction acquire more significance in the post-truth era since myths form an integral part of post-truth narratives in India. Myths hold considerable emotional appeal, which renders them a pivotal component in the post-truth discourse. They provide powerful narratives that shape collective beliefs and perceptions.

Examining how the select Indian English mythological fictions in the twenty-first century— *The Shiva Trilogy* (2010-2013) written by Amish Tripathi, *The Krishna Key* (2012) by Ashwin Sanghi and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished—The Story of Ravana and His People* (2011) by Anand Neelakantan—reflect the various elements of the post-truth phenomenon, the thesis seeks to explore the intricate relationship between mythological fiction and the broader post-truth discourse of the contemporary era. The framework of euhemerism or historical interpretation of mythology offers a better insight into the analysis of the reinterpretation of myths in the select texts, in the context of post-truth. The select works attempt to interpret mythology historically, anthropomorphise mythological characters, and re-narrate myths through a more rational lens, grounding them in a context that aligns with modern historical and scientific sensibilities.

The study observes that the select works re-narrate myths historically and further anthropomorphise divine or demon beings in myths as historical beings. They present myths as historical records of the past by placing mythological stories

into specific historical periods such as the Indus Valley civilisation. By reinterpreting myths using scientific jargon, they also attempt to rationalise supernatural beings, things and events in myths. Subsequently, aligning with the prevalent post-truth narratives regarding the existence of a golden past, the select novels reinterpret myths as records of a bygone era of greatness, and scientific and technological achievements.

Keywords: Post-Truth, Mythological Fiction, Historical Interpretation of Mythology, Euhemerism, Rationalisation of Myth

സംഗ്രഹം

മിത്തോളജിക്കൽ നോവലുകൾ ഇന്ത്യൻ ഇംഗ്ലീഷ് സാഹിത്യത്തിലെ ഒരു സുപ്രധാന വിഭാഗമാണ്. മിത്തുകൾ സത്യാനന്തരആഖ്യാനങ്ങളുടെ ഒരു പ്രധാനഘടകമായി നിലകൊള്ളുന്നതിനാൽ, സത്യാനന്തരകാലത്തെ മിത്തോളജിക്കൽ നോവലുകൾ അവയെ എങ്ങനെ പുനരാഖ്യാനവും പുനർവ്യാഖ്യാനവും ചെയ്യുന്നു എന്നതിന് കൂടുതൽ പ്രാധാന്യം കൈവരിക്കുന്നു. മിത്തുകളിൽ അന്തർലീനമായ വൈകാരികാർഷണം അവയെ സത്യാനന്തരഭൂമികയിലെ ഒരു സുപ്രധാന ഘടകമായി മാറ്റുന്നു. മിത്തുകൾ കൂട്ടായ വിശ്വാസങ്ങളെയും ധാരണകളെയും രൂപീകരിക്കുന്ന ആഖ്യാനങ്ങൾ പ്രദാനം ചെയ്യുന്നു.

ഇരുപത്തിയൊന്നാം നൂറ്റാണ്ടിൽ രചിക്കപ്പെട്ട തെരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത ഇന്ത്യൻ ഇംഗ്ലീഷ് മിത്തോളജിക്കൽ നോവലുകൾ എങ്ങനെ സത്യാനന്തരമെന്ന പ്രതിഭാസത്തിന്റെ വിവിധ ഘടകങ്ങളെ പ്രതിഫലിപ്പിക്കുന്നു എന്നത് പഠനവിധേയമാക്കുന്നതിലൂടെ, മിത്തോളജിക്കൽ നോവലുകളും വിശാലമായ സത്യാനന്തരഭൂമികയും തമ്മിലുള്ള സങ്കീർണ്ണമായ ബന്ധത്തെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള പര്യവേക്ഷണമാണ് ഈ തീസിസ് ലക്ഷ്യംവെക്കുന്നത്. ഇവിടെ പഠനവിധേയമാക്കിയിട്ടുള്ള നോവലുകൾ അമിഷ് ത്രിപതിയുടെ *ശിവ ഭിലജി* (2010-13), അശ്വിൻ സംഘിയുടെ *ദ കൃഷ്ണ കീ* (2012), ആനന്ദ് നീലകണ്ഠന്റെ *അസൂര: ടേല് ഓഫ് ദ വാൻകിഷ് ഡ്-ദ സ്റ്റോറി ഓഫ് രാവണ ആന്റ് ഹിസ് പീപ്പിൾ* (2011) എന്നിവയാണ്. മിത്തുകളുടെ ചരിത്രപരമായ വ്യാഖ്യാനം ഈ നോവലുകളിൽ മിത്തുകൾ എങ്ങനെ സത്യാനന്തരകാലത്ത് പുനർവ്യാഖ്യാനം ചെയ്യപ്പെടുന്നു എന്നതിൽ കൃത്യമായ ഉൾക്കാഴ്ച പ്രദാനം ചെയ്യാൻ സഹായിക്കുന്നു. മിത്തിനെ ചരിത്രപരമായി വ്യാഖ്യാനിക്കാനും, മിത്തിലെ കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളെ കൂടുതൽ മാനവികവൽക്കരിക്കാനുമുള്ള ശ്രമം തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത കൃതികളിൽ കാണാം. ആധുനിക ചരിത്രപരവും ശാസ്ത്രീയവുമായ സാഹചര്യങ്ങളുമായി പൊരുത്തപ്പെടുന്ന

രീതിയിൽ അവയെ ക്രമീകരിക്കുക വഴി കൂടുതൽ യുക്തിസഹമായ പുനരാഖ്യാനം ഈ കൃതികൾ മുന്നോട്ട് വെക്കുന്നു.

തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത രചനകൾ മിത്തുകളെ ചരിത്രപരമായി പുനരാഖ്യാനം ചെയ്യുന്നതിനോടൊപ്പം മിത്തുകളിൽ ദൈവികമായോ പൈശാചികമായോ ചിത്രീകരിക്കപ്പെട്ടിരിക്കുന്ന കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളിൽ മനുഷ്യസഹജമായ രൂപഭാവങ്ങൾ ആരോപിക്കുകയും ചെയ്യുന്നുവെന്ന് ഈ പഠനം നിരീക്ഷിക്കുന്നു. സിന്ധുനദീതട സംസ്കാരം പോലുള്ള ചരിത്രകാലഘട്ടങ്ങളിലേക്ക് മിത്തുകളെ പ്രതിഷ്ഠിച്ചുകൊണ്ട് ഈ നോവലുകൾ മിത്തുകളെ ഭൂതകാലത്തിന്റെ ചരിത്രരേഖകളായി അവതരിപ്പിക്കുന്നു. ശാസ്ത്രസംബന്ധിയായ പദാവലി ഉപയോഗിച്ചുള്ള പുനർവ്യാഖ്യാനത്തിലൂടെ മിത്തുകളിലെ അമാനുഷിക കഥാപാത്രങ്ങളെയും, വസ്തുക്കളെയും, സംഭവങ്ങളെയും യുക്തിപരമായി അവതരിപ്പിക്കാനും ഈ രചനകൾ ശ്രമിക്കുന്നുണ്ട്. പണ്ട് നിലനിന്നിരുന്ന ഒരു സുവർണ്ണകാലഘട്ടത്തെക്കുറിച്ചുള്ള സത്യാനന്തര ആഖ്യാനങ്ങളെ പിൻപറ്റിക്കൊണ്ട് തിരഞ്ഞെടുത്ത നോവലുകൾ, മിത്തുകളെ കഴിഞ്ഞുപോയ പ്രതാപകാലത്തിന്റെ ചരിത്രവും ശാസ്ത്രസാങ്കേതിക പുരോഗതിയും അടയാളപ്പെടുത്തുന്ന രേഖകളായി പുനർവ്യാഖ്യാനിക്കുന്നു.

താക്കോൽപദങ്ങൾ : സത്യാനന്തരം, മിത്തോജ്ജിക്കൽ നോവൽ, മിത്തുകളുടെ ചരിത്രപരമായ വ്യാഖ്യാനം, യുഹൈമറിസം, മിത്തുകളുടെ യുക്തിസഹമായ വ്യാഖ്യാനം

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Although the term ‘fiction’ suggests something that is invented, it often records the nuances of its time period either deliberately or unconsciously. It reflects the characteristics of the time, specificities of the culture, and mental trading of the author. Setting the interrelationship between fiction and society as the launch pad, this study analyses select Indian English mythological fiction of the twenty-first century, in the light of the post-truth discourse in the world. As Terry Eagleton observes, “Literature *is* in fact deeply conditioned by its social context, and any critical account of it which omits this fact is therefore automatically deficient” (469). Considering the strong bond between literature and society, literary works can be employed to understand a nation’s sociocultural and political settings at a given time. Taking the interrelationship between literature and society into consideration, the present study attempts to analyse select Indian English mythological fiction of the twenty-first century, in the light of post-truth discourse in the world. The select fictional works for this thesis include the Shiva Trilogy (2010-2013) written by Amish Tripathi, *The Krishna Key* (2012) by Ashwin Sanghi and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished—The Story of Ravana and His People* (2011) by Anand Neelakantan. Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy comprises *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). By analysing the select works, the thesis seeks to explore the intricate relationship between mythological fiction and the broader post-truth discourse of the contemporary era. The thesis states that Indian English mythological fictions in the twenty-first

century, influenced by the post-truth discourse, interpret mythology historically, anthropomorphize mythological characters, and re-narrate myths through a more rational lens, grounding them in a context that aligns with modern historical and scientific sensibilities.

The human race has been perpetually fascinated by myths for ages and the notion of myth has been a fascinating subject that captivated scholars, leading to numerous endeavours aimed at comprehending and elucidating its conceptual foundations. The term mythology is derived from the Greek word *mythos* meaning stories. Though myths resist rigid categorisation due to the enigmatic nature of their origins and the inherent ambiguity surrounding their meanings, a myth could be perceived as:

A kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms. The term has a wide range of meanings, which can be divided roughly into ‘rationalist’ and ‘romantic’ versions: in the first, a myth is a false or unreliable story or belief (adjective: mythical), while in the second, ‘myth’ is a superior intuitive mode of cosmic understanding (adjective: mythic). (Baldick 163)

According to Mircea Eliade, myth “narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in Primordial Time, the fabled time of the beginnings” (6). Devdutt Pattanaik conceives Indian mythology as stories “spawned in the collective imagination that captured the worldview of a people” (5). Analysing the evolution of

human beings, Yuval Noah Harari maintains that "... [l]egends, myths, gods and religions appeared for the first time with the Cognitive Revolution," which occurred between 70,000 and 30,000 years ago with the "appearance of new ways of thinking and communicating" (*Sapiens* 27, 23). Equating myth with fiction, Harari argues that the ability to create "common myths that exist only in people's collective imagination" enabled human beings to form communities and civilisations (30).

The interpretation of myth can take varied approaches including literal reading, symbolic reading, allegorical reading and so on. According to Devdutt Pattanaik, the major ways of interpretation of myth include "historical", "strategic", "allegorical", and "psychological" (161). The historical interpretation assumes mythology is composed of events that occurred a long time ago while strategic interpretation recognises myths as deliberate strategic narratives "to impose an ideology" and "aimed at making people think a particular way" (161, 174). Allegorical interpretation is a common way of "rationalising" and "domesticating" myth which is treated as a "vehicle for expressing something that is otherwise too abstract or profound or complex" (183). In the psychological mode of interpretation, myths are regarded as metaphors of the mind or "safety valve of culture, expressing unacceptable ideas in acceptable manner" (189). While E. B. Tylor prefers to read myths "literally," Max Muller advocates a "symbolic approach" to interpreting myths (Segal 20). For Tylor and J G Frazer, myths are "primitive counterparts to science" whereas Muller conceives them as "symbolic descriptions of natural phenomena" (20, 23). However, when "Tylor treats myth as an autonomous text, Frazer ties myth to ritual, which enacts it" (24). Claude Levi-Strauss also considers

myth as “the primitive counterpart” of modern science (30). Levy-Bruhl maintains that for the ancient people myth was not a means to explain or control the natural world but a method to be “in commune with it in a mystic way” (26).

Myths, in the contemporary era, are often interpreted as symbolic “fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity, and existence” (Baldick 163). When myths are conceived as something more than a part of a belief system, they could be interpreted as allegories of human values and natural phenomena or they could be understood as pre-scientific explanations of natural events or as distorted historical facts. However, Karen Armstrong maintains that:

Mythology is not an early attempt at history, and does not claim that its tales are objective fact. Like a novel, an opera or a ballet, myth is make-believe; it is a game that transfigures our fragmented, tragic world, and helps us to glimpse new possibilities by asking ‘what if?’—a question which has also provoked some of our most important discoveries in philosophy, science and technology. (7)

Though necessarily not factual, like literary works, mythology can offer insights into the history and culture of a particular group of people. Subsequently, the historical interpretation of myths remains an important approach to understanding myths. However, reading mythology as a source to understand history is different from reading mythology as historical treatises. Myths are not bound by historical accuracy; they blend truth and fiction to achieve deeper philosophical meanings or moral lessons.

Indian English fiction, since the late nineteenth century, has been offering unique re-readings and interpretations of mythological stories and characters by blending the vast arena of mythology into fictional narratives. Indian mythological fiction opens up a speculative world and characters inspired by mythology. Mythology and folktales act as rich reservoirs for Indian fiction in English as well as many regional literatures. There exists an undeniable association between Indian literature and mythology (Srinath, 2003; Vitthani, 2018; Sastry, 2021).

Recognising the conscious integration of myths into fictional narratives as an artistic device to enhance the impact of fiction, Meenakshi Mukherjee opines that “a worldview is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience, and the Indian epics offer the basis of such a common background which permeates the collective unconscious of the whole nation” (31). According to her, myths are timeless and they “... in spite of their distance from contemporary reality, do have, for that particular group of men to whom they are culturally relevant, a kind of fundamental significance” (Mukherjee 134).

According to Mukherjee, the significant use of myths in Indian English literature began in the 1950s with writers like Sudhin Ghose and Raja Rao (136). In the earlier Indian English fictional narratives, as Mukherjee observes, myths were integrated either as a digressional technique or as structural parallels.

There are writers who have tried their hands at both the methods. Sudhin Ghose’s writing, for example, is normally digressional. Usually he weaves various legends and folk-tales and myths into the fabric of his novel to attain some desired effect. ... second method of using myth as a structural parallel

is sometimes used consistently throughout a novel (as in Narayan's *The Man Eater of Malgudi* or Anand's *The Old Woman and the Cow*) but more often it is done in a fragmentary way, illuminating a character here or enriching a situation there. (Mukherjee 136)

In addition to serving as digressional techniques or structural parallels, contemporary fictional narratives actively seek to re-narrate mythological events and characters. Such novels can be termed "mythological fiction" because they not only draw from mythological sources but also reimagine and reinterpret these ancient stories.

This thesis operationalises "mythological fiction" as a genre of fiction that incorporates mythological characters as central figures and re-narrates mythological events within its narrative structure. The term mythological fiction is chosen over "mythic fiction" or "mythical fiction" to ensure clarity and precision. According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, the term "mythic" refers to something "existing only in myths (=ancient stories) or other traditional stories, or relating or similar to such stories" or "seeming to be very big, important, or special." Similarly, the term "mythical" denotes something "existing only in stories" or "imaginary or not real" ("Mythical"). Using these terms can lead to misconception, suggesting that the fiction is either unreal or has an exaggerated importance rather than being rooted in mythological traditions. By using "mythological fiction," this research remains focused on a genre that systematically incorporates and interprets mythological content.

A mythological novel draws largely from mythology in terms of characters, concepts or events and provides a revisionist reading of popular mythology. Novels in the form of fascinating re-readings of Indian myths appear in several regional languages as well as in English. A good collection of mythological fiction was produced towards the end of the twentieth century and in the twenty-first century in Indian regional languages which include P. K. Balakrishnan's 1973 novel *Ini Njan Urangatte* (And Now Let Me Sleep), M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (The Second Chance, 1984), and *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi* (1984) by Pratibha Ray. The twenty-first century witnessed numerous fictional narratives in English based on Indian mythology. They include works such as *Prince of Ayodhya* (2003) by Ashok Banker, *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devadutt Pattanaik, the Shiva Trilogy (2010-2013) by Amish Tripathi, *The Krishna Key* (2012) by Ashwin Sanghi, *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan* (2013-2015) by Anand Neelakantan, *Karna's Wife: The Outcaste's Queen* (2013) by Kavita Kane, *Arjuna: Saga of a Pandava Warrior-Prince* (2013) by Anuja Chandramouli, The Hastinapur Series (2013-2017) by Sharath Komarraju, *The Liberation of Sita* (2016) by Volga (P. Lalita Kumari), and The Kalki Trilogy (2017-2019) by Kevin Missal. Most of these retellings of mythology revolve around characters and situations that appear in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the two epics from India, which have been retold numerous times over the years. Still, they offer new vistas of readings and retellings. Sunitha Sastry states that the retelling of myth has gained "the status of 'pop culture'" in the new millennium (2). Through these revisionist readings, by and large, minor characters in the epics move to the centre,

as well as unexplored characteristics, aspects, and life situations of these characters get explored.

A majority of these mythological fictions adopt the perspectives of minor characters of the epics. For instance, when the *Ramayana* is read from the perspective of Ravana, Sita, Urmila or any other character other than the protagonist Rama, numerous versions of the story can be produced. Presently, we have countless such retellings of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in Indian English fiction. Recently, retellings of mythology have become an attempt to re-read the ancient past of the nation itself. Such narratives treat myth from a historical point of view and adopt the historical interpretation of mythology. Mythological fiction of the present age could be understood as a quest to comprehend the ancient past of the nation, and therefore, an attempt to reimagine the history of the nation using a mythological lens. They focus on the plausibility of myth being a reality of the bygone age and they narrate a probable glorious past of Indian culture by re-reading mythology historically. These texts demystify myths and present mythical stories in a more rational way to suit modern readers. The present research explores the increased popularity of Indian mythological fiction in the twenty-first century in relation to the post-truth discourse.

The term post-truth, in essence, describes the nature of society which gives less importance to truth or facts and rather embraces believability and emotional appeal. Arguably, rejection or negligence of truth in favour of believability characterises the post-truth condition in simpler terms. The word “post-truth” gained sudden public attention in 2016 owing to the Presidential election of the United

States of America (USA) and the Brexit referendum. Subsequently, the *Oxford Dictionary* identified the term as the word of the year in 2016 considering the great leap in its usage, approximately 2000 percentile. According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, post-truth is an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Oxford Word of the Year”). Emphasis should be laid on the fact that the word post-truth is not a noun, but an adjective, a descriptive term that denotes conditions in which emotions and personal beliefs often overshadow facts and objective truths. The post-truth condition reflects a shift in how information is processed and valued. It highlights the changing dynamics in information dissemination and public perception.

The element of emotional appeal inherent in myths qualifies them to be integral agents of the post-truth discourse. While myths and post-truth narratives have distinct origins and functions, these two forms of narration overlap in certain aspects, especially in how they influence beliefs and perceptions. At their core, both myths and post-truth narratives are constructed as stories that are meant to be spread and retold. Their narrative strength lies in their relatability, which allows them to be easily communicated and remembered, further embedding them within the cultural or social fabric. In addition, both myths and post-truth narratives rely heavily on emotional appeal rather than factual accuracy to convey their message. Myths often utilise powerful symbolic imagery and dramatic stories that resonate deeply with human emotions and psychological states. Similarly, post-truth narratives

manipulate emotions to strengthen their impact and persuade the audience, often prioritising emotional resonance over objective data.

The word post-truth first appeared in 1992 in an essay published by the Serbian-American playwright Steve Tesich. He used the term to denote and describe the socio-political situation of the United States of America during the Gulf War. According to Tesich, the people of America have attained “a spiritual mechanism” that enables them to discard truth easily and “they have freely decided that” they “want to live in some post-truth world” (13). The word remained unpopular for more than a decade till Ralph Keyes came up with the phrase “post-truth era” in his 2004 book titled the same. David Roberts pioneered the use of the phrase “post-truth politics.” He used the term for the first time in one of his blogs in *Grist* in 2010. However, the term post-truth came into the spotlight only in 2016, in the backdrop of two major political events in the Western world—the American presidential election and the Brexit referendum.

Apart from post-truth, critics developed various terms to denote the particular socio-political situation of the late twentieth century and the beginning of the new millennium in which believability acquires more significance than facts. Such terms include “truthiness,” “pre-truth,” “truthful hyperbole,” “emo-truth” and “zohnerism.” The term “truthiness” was coined by Stephen Colbert, in 2005, to describe the socio-political condition of the time, particularly concerning the USA. In an interview with AV Club, Colbert asserted that “truthiness is ‘what I say is right, and [nothing] anyone else says could possibly be true.’ It’s not only that I *feel* it to be true, but that I *feel* it to be true.” Arguing that truthiness is a current

phenomenon where appearance receives more importance than fact, Colbert states: “... in that it doesn’t seem to matter what facts are. It used to be, everyone was entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts. But that’s not the case anymore. Facts matter not at all. Perception is everything. It’s certainty.” Colbert’s use of the term truthiness resembles the term post-truth in many aspects. Though Colbert is the first person to use the word truthiness in its current sense of meaning, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word existed during the 1830s denoting “truthfulness.”

“Pre-truth” is another similar term which was coined by the American political commentator and journalist Ruth Marcus. With the term pre-truth, she denotes a situation where people believe that they can foresee things and make their beliefs true. She suggests that the world has entered into a pre-truth presidency which is more dangerous than the post-truth one. According to her, today, people live in a dangerous situation where “truth” is created based on one’s gut feeling and later proofs are being found or created accordingly. Thus, she prefers to call it the pre-truth presidency rather than the post-truth one.

In the first book credited to Donald Trump, he talks about something called “truthful hyperbole.” In his view, people tend to be influenced by something that happens to be “the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular” and consequently, “an innocent form of exaggeration” proves to be “a very effective form of promotion” (58). Trump does not count truthful hyperbole as something shameful but as an artist’s creative license to manipulate language for rhetorical

effect. However, at its core, truthful hyperbole demonstrates a disregard for factual accuracy and even encompasses deliberate falsehood.

Jayson Harsin introduced the term emo-truth in his 2018 paper titled “Post-Truth Right-Wing Populism: Emo-Truth from the French Anti-Gender Theory Movement to Trump.” According to Harsin, what he considers emo-truth “encapsulates the relationship of emotion and popular truth” (19). He defines emo-truth as “truth where emotion serves as inference” and proof, and evidence hardly enjoys any relevance in that. The notion of emo-truth, fundamentally, revolves around subjective feelings experienced by an individual, prioritising personal emotions over empirical evidence or factual substantiation. Harsin asserts that “events branded by the words anger/rage (*colere*) also demonstrate the emo-truth” (21).

James K. Glassman coined the term “zohnerism,” based on an experiment conducted by Nathan Zohner in 1997 and defined it as “the use of true fact to lead a scientifically and mathematically ignorant public to a false conclusion.” Zohner, a 14-year-old student, proposed banning dihydrogen monoxide, which convinced 43 out of 50 of his classmates to support the ban. He cited its dangers, like causing deaths and severe burns, without revealing it was just water (H₂O). This experiment demonstrated how easily people can be misled by partial information. The Zohnerism effect is very much present in the post-truth political discourse where partial truth is often employed to mislead or persuade people.

The Economist describes post-truth as making “assertions that ‘feel true’ but have no basis in fact” (“Art of the Lie”). According to C G Prado, post-truth is:

the voicing of personal views, exaggeration, embellishment, impulsive expression, and straightforward prevarication. ... But while it is reasonable enough to respect statements of personal opinion, what is not reasonable is expanding that respect to an irrational level by holding all statements equally viable and inviolate regardless of content. (8)

Post-truth assertions refute the need for verification and do not entertain factual explanations. They are, often, formulated to reinforce the existing beliefs among the people. Though they lack supporting evidence, they succeed in appealing to the emotions of people and achieve legitimacy through repeated retellings.

The prefix “post” in the word post-truth does not indicate something that comes after truth as in “post-independence” or “post-colonialism,” and the term is not synonymous with a lie. According to Ignas Kalpokas, “the prefix ‘post-’ does not indicate that we have moved to ‘beyond’ or ‘after’ truth as such but that we have entered an era where the distinction between truth and lie is no longer important” (13). Kalpokas argues that “truth is not discarded completely” in the post-truth era and “post-truth does not have to involve discarding truth and embracing lies; it refers, instead, to the blurring of the distinction between the two” (2). The distinction between truth and lie is blurred to a great extent that certain arguments are received as truth even in the absence of proper evidence; on the other hand, certain arguments are discarded as fake narratives or propaganda regardless of existing proof.

The lie is not a novel concept and the world has been dealing with lies for a long time. However, in the contemporary era, characterised by the abundance of

post-truth narratives, the nature and implications of lies, misinformation and disinformation have assumed new dimensions. The term post-truth, rather than being a synonym for lies, denotes the changed approach towards lies and fake news—how people deal with lies and fake news in the new era. In the post-truth era, “something becomes truth because people believe in it and act as if it was true because they *would like* it to be true” (Kalpokas 5). However, what people believe as their subjective truth may not always have a footing in reality or factual evidence. Ralph Keyes identifies a certain category of truth that can be called “enhanced truth” which is “not exactly the truth but fall short of a lie” (17). A great part of the post-truth claims appears in the form of enhanced truth which cannot be called a lie as such for it may contain partial truth in it. Lee McIntyre also opines that post-truth is not just the propagation of false news. He asserts: “In the past we had faced serious challenges—even to the notion of truth itself—but never before have such challenges been so openly embraced a strategy for the political subordination of reality” (9).

The first and foremost characteristic of a post-truth society can be recognised as the denial of factual evidence or truth in favour of believability or one’s preconceived beliefs and notions. In the post-truth era, as stated by the American historian Daniel Boorstin, “‘Truth’ has been displaced by ‘believability’” (qtd. in Keyes 9). In the post-truth discourse, people prefer to believe in something without looking at its truth value but at the comfort it may provide. According to Ralph Keyes, “[n]ow, clever people that we are, we have come up with rationales for tampering with truths so we can dissemble guilt-free” which he refers to as the post-truth scenario (16). The readiness of people to believe in any illogical claims, either

to stick on to their preconceived notions or because of blind belief in certain sources, leads to the formation of a post-truth society. In the post-truth scenario, falsifying an argument becomes a herculean task because people readily accept post-truth claims even in the absence of evidence. Moreover, even if certain arguments are proven to be false and misleading, people may willingly take up those particular post-truth claims as their subjective truth, neglecting the available evidence to the contrary. In the post-truth discourse, the responsibility to prove the credibility of a claim does not fall upon the person who puts forward the claim, rather if that claim is not true, it becomes the responsibility of others to falsify it. Such a task of fact-checking might be an unpleasant, often, heavy responsibility to take up and consequently, many people willingly forsake such a mission.

“Political subordination of reality” (McIntyre 9) is normalised and naturalised in the post-truth era. Lee McIntyre argues that the experiences of dealing with this condition are not similar to any past experiences of humanity and thus post-truth can be identified as a new phenomenon. However, conflicting opinions exist regarding the novelty of the notion of post-truth. Scholars maintain divergent viewpoints regarding whether post-truth represents a recent and distinctive notion that emerged in the late twentieth century or whether it is a concept that has endured over an extended period of time in human history. Though some critics, including Lee McIntyre, identify post-truth as a new phenomenon, certain others, including Yuval Noah Harari, put forth the idea that there is nothing new in the concept. McIntyre identifies post-truth as a newly emerged phenomenon that originated towards the end of the twentieth century and was influenced by postmodern

ideologies. Thus, he calls postmodernism the “godfather” of post-truth (McIntyre 108). According to the second group of scholars, propaganda, misinformation, and fake news have existed ever since human societies emerged. Post-truth, consequently, cannot be considered a new phenomenon in its entire sense for the traits of post-truth can be traced long back in history.

Most of the scholars who identify post-truth as a new phenomenon count it as an outcome of postmodern thoughts (McIntyre 108; D’ Ancona 91; Dennett). Postmodernism, in essence, has challenged the supremacy of a single truth or grand narrative and advocated that we do not have “the truth” but versions of it. The postmodern hostility toward metanarratives encouraged alter-narratives which in a way restructured the concept of truth itself. However, it would not be accurate to assert that postmodernist thought is in favour of the post-truth situation. Rather, it could be said that post-truth politics has harnessed the postmodern notions of the coexistence of multiple truths and the necessity for alter-narratives in a twisted way. Postmodernism does not advocate misinformation or disinformation as alter-narratives; rather it advocates the inclusion of diverse perspectives which are often neglected and disregarded. Postmodernism “does not reject the facts of the factual truths per se, but rather, rejects the existence of a single, objective meta-narratives that can explain the facts” (Brahms 12). However, in the realm of post-truth politics, the notion of alter-narratives becomes distorted, resulting in narratives that are detached from objective reality. Postmodernism talks about the plausible existence of multiple truths, whereas post-truth narratives create their own ‘truths’ which may not be close to truth and reality at all. According to Ignas Kalpokas, postmodernism

was not the inspirational force to post-truth, but some postmodern critics were insightful enough to predict a situation similar to the post-truth condition, years ago (104) and it got materialised as the post-truth world. Thus, post-truth cannot be counted as a result of postmodernism. Nevertheless, post-truth politics has made use of postmodernism in its favour by highlighting the possibility of the existence of multiple truths.

Those who view post-truth as a longstanding phenomenon highlight its relationship with political discourse. It was George Orwell who stated that “political language—and with variations, this is true of all political parties, from conservatives to anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidarity to pure wind” (8). In her article titled “Truth and Politics” (1967), Hannah Arendt argues that the greatest rival of truth is not a lie but an opinion where the borderline between fact and opinion is blurred. Works of George Orwell and Hannah Arendt suggest that traits commonly associated with the post-truth era are not new in history but have been part of political and societal discourses for much longer. Orwell’s critique implies that political figures and movements have long relied on linguistic strategies to alter public perception, making falsehoods appear credible. Arendt’s opinion resonates strongly with the post-truth condition, where the boundary between fact and opinion is often obscured. Yuval Noah Harari in his 2019 work, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, maintains that “humans have always lived in the age of post-truth. Homo sapiens is a post-truth species, whose power depends on creating and believing fictions” (206). Harari substantiates his argument by quoting religion as an example of the notion of post-

truth. In his opinion, millions of people, for centuries, have locked themselves in the frames of various religions without questioning their factual authenticity and even after most of the religious beliefs turned out to be superstitious, people still believe in religions. “The truth is that truth was never high on the agenda of *Homo sapiens*,” states Harari (210). Since “... religions have been the repositories and interpreters of sacred stories—of myths—and the creators of rituals to express them” (Leeming 19) Harari identifies myths as powerful “fictions” created by human beings which serve to “unite human collectives” (Harari, *21 Lessons* 206).

In short, conscious efforts to spread (unsubstantiated) believable narratives, lies, false information, imagined thoughts, gibberish and propaganda have been a part of human culture for a long time. Though either one of these elements or a combination of them constitutes post-truth assertions, in the post-truth discourse, the emphasis lies on the believability of the claim and political subordination of reality through believable narratives. Examining propaganda propagation by Joseph Goebbels during the Nazi reign and other similar historical events in modern world politics, the presence of post-truth narratives could be identified as a long-existing phenomenon which got its name only recently. The present era, which is recognised as the post-truth age, stands out as unique from the previous instances because the magnitude of misinformation has escalated so much that it has become the new socio-political culture of the time. Besides, as David Block observes, “[w]hat is perhaps new ... is the focus of attention today, not exclusively on totalitarian regimes, but also on countries deemed to have a long traditional [sic] of fully functioning democracy” (5). Block’s assertion emphasises that what is new about

post-truth narratives is not their existence. The new digitised world order has immensely contributed to a situation where propaganda narratives are disseminated unchecked, regardless of their factual basis. Hence, it can be asserted that the concept of post-truth is not merely a new term for an old phenomenon; rather, it reflects a paradigm shift in the way information and truth are perceived and valued in contemporary society. Unlike past eras where misinformation and propaganda were recognised and counted as distortions of accepted reality, the post-truth era is characterised by a widespread disregard for objective facts in favour of appeals to emotion and personal belief.

The post-truth era is also distinctive in the reception of lies and false news. The public's attitude has changed drastically: though lying was considered a great sin and crime in the past, recent experiments show that lies have become a part of people's lives (Keyes 10). Lying has evolved as a relatively small crime over time. Lies are often categorised into whether someone lies for a 'good cause' or vice versa. In a way, it is established that all lies are not bad but some are meant for a good cause. In the post-truth condition, truth is what works in a particular situation. If people are ready to accept and agree with something, that becomes their truth or the truth of that specific situation. Verifiability, consequently, becomes no longer significant as a criterion to determine the factual accuracy or truth value of something. This change in the attitude of people towards lies is peculiar and contributes to the post-truth era. According to Steve Tesich, there is no more any need to suppress the truth as "we have acquired a spiritual mechanism that can

denude truth any significance. ... we, as a free people, have freely decided that we want to live in some post-truth world. (13)

In the contemporary era, people are “not merely passively acted upon by post-truth leaders; instead, post-truth is co-created through the joint interaction of the communicators and their audiences” (Kalpokas 18). In the post-truth era, the public shows readiness to believe in certain narratives, even after their falsity has been demonstrated for they find comfort in those lies rather than in truth. If the truth is bitter and in contrast with their existing beliefs, they go for the alter-narratives even though they are proven to be false. Analysing the changed attitude of the people, Ralph Keys claims that we have entered into an age of “alt.ethics,” an ethical system in which “dissembling is considered okay, not necessarily wrong, therefore not really ‘dishonest’ in the negative sense of the word” (16). In Lee McIntyre’s view, “[i]n the purest form, post-truth is when one thinks that the crowd’s reaction actually does change the facts ...” (17).

The characteristics of the post-truth era are seemingly ingrained in fictional as well as non-fictional narratives. Moreover, narratives occupy a pivotal position in the post-truth discourse. The post-truth politics entails the deliberate construction and dissemination of believable narratives. A well-designed narrative always attracts people’s attention and this power of narratives helps the proponents of post-truth narratives to create their own truth. Identifying the vital importance of narratives in the contemporary world, Ignas Kalpokas states:

In post-truth, political (and other) narratives simply exist without a strict relationship to an underlying reality—or, rather, they simply construct a

parallel reality of their own. Such narratives exist in a way similar to works of fiction that are presented as viable alternatives to the lived environment.

(13)

Most of the post-truth narratives are imagined realities that a group or more than one group of people wish to be the truth. Kalpokas identifies those narratives as “escapist fiction” which constitutes “its own lived reality.” Most of these narratives offer a sense of psychological comfort to people by catering to their existing beliefs. The psychological comfort provided by post-truth narratives resembles the mental reassurance offered by beliefs and mythological stories. Comparing these narratives, Harari states that post-truth narratives, in effect, are the same as the myths of “miracles, angels, demons and witches” (*21 Lessons* 206).

Bruce McComiskey and others argue that in the 2016 American presidential election, “unethical rhetorical strategies” have been used. The rhetorical strategies used during the event include vague and misleading social media posts, name-calling, denial of meaning, hate speech and so on. The influence of the prime ministerial candidate Donald Trump’s rhetoric strategies on the public was termed the “Trump effect” by critics. McComiskey defines the term Trump effect as “the material and social results of successful post-truth rhetoric” (33). He goes on to state that

Post-truth rhetoric ... is based on bullshit parading as truth, xenophobia parading as patriotism, and ethos and pathos parading as logos, among other things; the effects of all of this post-truth rhetoric—the Trump effect—are anger, fear, angst, and violence. (McComiskey 33)

According to McComiskey, post-truth rhetorical strategies include name-calling, hyperbole and metaphors (29). In his view, “in its current stage, post-truth signifies a state in which language lacks any reference to facts, truths, and realities” (6).

Critics, including Lee McIntyre, identify that the post-truth condition of today has not emerged swiftly; rather it has been a slow process that enabled the people to take in lies or half-truths as truth. Creating doubts among people and rejection of science can be considered the primary phase towards the post-truth condition. McIntyre argues: “In a world where ideology trumps science, post-truth is the inevitable next step” (31). According to David Block, anti-expertism and anti-intellectualism are integral to post-truth narratives (50-51). Post-truth narratives, often, question the legitimacy of the so-called experts in specific domains and come up with many possible alternative narratives, even though many of them could not be substantiated with evidence. Proponents of anti-expertism and anti-intellectualism consider themselves equipped with more knowledge than the established experts in their respective fields. Conspiracy theories and rumour bombs thrive in the post-truth environment due to their inherent disregard for the significance of factual evidence and empirical validation. Different and conflicting opinions about something will create confusion among people which will lead them to believe whatever they feel comfortable with. The human mind always tries to get away from conflict and to be in peace. Once people get confused about what should be believed, this particular state of mind is exploited in the post-truth world. Psychologists put forth certain factors related to the human psyche that may have facilitated the progression of the post-truth narratives.

Cognitive dissonance in psychology denotes the mental discomfort that people encounter when they are exposed to two or more contradictory beliefs, ideas or values. Leon Festinger, in *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), proposed that the human psyche always struggles to attain internal psychological consistency and when it comes across opposing viewpoints to the existing beliefs, it will try to resolve the contradiction to reduce the resulting discomfort. In order to maintain harmony between our beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour, our psyche will try to incorporate new information with existing information or avoid circumstances and contradictory information altogether. Cognitive bias is considered one of the deep roots of the post-truth scenario (McIntyre 36; Ball 120). A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thought that affects decisions and judgments human beings make. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman are two important figures who contributed significantly in the area of cognitive bias. People like to think that they are rational and objective in decision-making. However, these biases may lead them to poor decisions in many situations. In most cases, people tend to follow swift and easy methods to make judgments, thus there occurs a high probability of erroneous and false judgments. Cognitive bias encompasses all the chances for arriving at erroneous judgments because of such systematic errors in thinking and decision-making processes.

Confirmation bias—one of the major types of cognitive bias—is the tendency to confirm one's prior belief. Often, people gather information selectively in order to reach their desired conclusion. In that process, they may leave all those pieces of information that contradict their prior belief and will go only for the information that

will be compatible with their already existing beliefs. It was Peter Wason, an English psychologist, who coined the term confirmation bias. Through a series of experiments, Wason concluded that people go for confirmation rather than falsification (139). People tend to avoid certain situations in which they will be forced to reconsider and re-evaluate their existing beliefs. For that, they may opt for only those data which will be helpful to confirm their earlier beliefs and opinions.

In 2010, Brenden Nyhan and Jason Reifler proposed a psychological phenomenon called the “backfire effect.” Analysing a survey conducted among conservatives in the United States, they proposed that when people face contradictory evidence, their already established beliefs become stronger instead of changing their opinions and beliefs. In the experiment conducted by Nyhan and Reifler, subjects showed great reluctance to believe in the factual evidence that was contradictory to their existing convictions and they exhibited increasing confidence in their earlier beliefs as they were exposed to more evidence that went against their existing biases (Nyhan and Reifler 23-24). The Dunning-Kruger effect is another form of cognitive bias that concerns low-ability people’s incompetence to identify their own ineffectiveness. People often create a great notion of themselves and believe that they have abundant knowledge in many areas. This kind of self-belief leads to an overestimation of one’s positive sides, deliberately neglecting one’s negative characteristics. Eventually, the Dunning-Kruger effect leads people to believe that they are more accurate and correct in their beliefs and opinions than others, and thus, superior to others. Both the backfire effect and the Dunning-Kruger

effect stem out from the notion of motivated reasoning—the idea that what really is true will be affected by what we want or hope to be true.

Social conformity is another aspect of cognitive dissonance. If we are surrounded by people who share our beliefs, then even our most irrational beliefs will be reinforced just because we have others to support our views. In his famous 1955 paper, “Opinion and Social Pressure,” Solomon Asch states that there is a social aspect to belief (qtd. in McIntyre 38). Suppose our beliefs and opinions are not in harmony with those of others around us. In that case, we might be ready to discard our beliefs and opinions—even if we have enough evidence to believe in them— to agree with others. The cognitive bias affects our ability to think clearly and stops us from recognising when we begin to think irrationally.

Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winning Israeli-American psychologist, in his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* advocates that human beings possess two systems of thinking process. The first type, which he calls the System One is effortless thinking. For this kind of thinking process, we do not invest much of our time and effort; this thinking happens without the person’s conscious effort. The second kind of thinking, the System Two, works as a result of deliberate attempts. It requires conscious mental effort and adequate time. In the post-truth era, System One thinking, which offers an effortless way of processing information without conscious effort, predominates. To seek truth, individuals must engage System Two thinking which requires time and effort for fact-checking. However, in practice, people often opt for the easier System One thinking which may lead them to believe in anything that comfortably fits into their existing belief system.

The post-truth political environment of today can be assessed and understood in relation to populist politics. Populism is “a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two- homogenous and antagonistic camps, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonte generale* (general will) of the people” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 6). While the term originated in the nineteenth century, its definition remains ambiguous, with a distinction between the people and elite varying across different discourses. Who is included in the category of people and who belongs to the elite category differs according to the various discourses in which it operates.

Populist movements claim to represent the ‘voice of the people’ and identify other group/s of people in their rival camps as ‘the other’ or the elite. According to populist ideology, ‘people’ are morally good and what they believe and stand for will be the right option which should be materialised in the current corrupt society. Ernesto Laclau has identified populism as a revolutionary concept with which marginalised groups enable themselves to question power structures (Laclau 114). However, along with being anti-elitist, a populist also exhibits traits of “antipluralist.” In Waisbord’s opinion, “the upsurge of populist politics is symptomatic of the consolidation of post-truth communication as a distinctive feature of contemporary politics” (18). As observed by Waisbord, in the contemporary world, populism aligns closely with post-truth politics, as it elevates the people or majority as the dominant force, prioritising sentiments over justice and egalitarian values.

According to Ignas Kalpokas, “[m]ediatisation directly enables the post-truth era” (57). Mediatisation denotes a situation where the media shapes the process and discourse of political communication which eventually shapes the society in which the process takes place. However, when something is proven fake, in most cases, the media houses have shown readiness to admit their mistake. It is not the same with propaganda news for it is taken for granted that every media house has its own political and business interests. To fulfil those interests, they may hide some news or partially tell the truth to the public. Proponents and practitioners of post-truth politics claim that traditional media cannot be trusted for they are biased. For a long time, traditional news media enjoyed the power to shape public opinion though most of them evidently operated as mouthpieces of particular political, religious, or social groups. The attack on traditional media was one of the first steps of post-truth politics through which it created the need for alternative media and alternative news. “Since the audience for news now consists of so many partisans, the line between traditional and alternative media has blurred, and many now prefer to get their news from sources that adhere to questionable values for truth telling” (McIntyre 65).

The post-truth condition of contemporary society is facilitated by the digital revolution and the rise of social media (McIntyre 65). “The rise of social media as a source of news blurred the lines even further between news and opinion, as people shared stories from blogs, alternative news sites, ..., as if they were all true” (McIntyre 72). The emergence of the internet and social media has revolutionised the dissemination of information, offering unprecedented access to knowledge. However, the lack of rigorous fact-checking on digital platforms often leads to the

widespread circulation of misinformation before its accuracy can be verified. While social media has empowered individuals to share information and opinions, it has also facilitated the rapid spread of false news due to the absence of censorship based on truth value.

Despite the widely recognised lack of trustworthiness in social media as a source of news, people tend to trust content from these platforms because they receive the information from their close associates and loved ones. Since people consider their acquaintances as credible sources of information, they exhibit an inclination to place trust in the information provided through their friends' social media profiles. Once a narrative, either true or false, gets disseminated through social media it will continue to reach people even after a long time of its creation—even after it proves to be misleading and fake. The anonymity of social media authors, which allows content creation and sharing without revealing the true identity of a person, also contributes significantly to the post-truth scenario.

By providing personalised information, social media fosters an echo chamber effect where users are exposed only to content that aligns with their existing beliefs.

They:

become isolated from information that contradicts their beliefs as a narrative that circulates within the group ... not only unites the members in their joint belief and shared opposition to the rest of the world but also provides an entire information infrastructure that is necessary to function in (their version of) the world.” (Kalpokas 24)

This phenomenon, known as the “filter bubble,” was coined by Eli Pariser to describe the intellectual isolation resulting from personalised web searches (Pariser 17-18). Our computer monitor acts as “a one-way mirror” that reflects our own interests by analysing our previous clicks and search history (13).

Since 2009, online search results have been personalised based on users’ past activities, which reinforces the user’s existing beliefs and diminishes exposure to contradictory viewpoints. This algorithmic curation of information creates an oblique perception of reality, as users are shielded from diverse perspectives (Kalpokas 28). The filter bubble resembles the concept of the echo chamber in media studies which describes a situation that reinforces one’s beliefs through communication and repetition in a sealed system. The filter bubble operates invisibly with users and they remain unaware of its influence on their information consumption. Consequently, individuals find comfort in insulated spaces that echo their beliefs and perspectives which in turn perpetuates a cycle of confirmation bias and intellectual stagnation. Since users do not consciously enter the filter bubble, there will be a lack of motivation to step out and gain a clear understanding of information. Thus, social media plays an important tool “in facilitating post-truth” narratives (McIntyre 86).

Though most of the discussions on post-truth are focused on the political discourses of the USA and Britain, “post-truth is universal regardless of political conviction” (Kalpokas 3). However, the USA and Britain are acknowledged as the forthbringers of post-truth politics and most of the existing studies on the notion specifically place emphasis on the political scenario of these two nations (Ball,

2017; Wilber, 2017; McIntyre, 2018; Block 2019). As the notion gained wider recognition, other nations also began to be recognised as the subject matter of further studies. According to Ranjit Goswami “The world’s largest democracy has been living in a post-truth world for years.” According to academicians, India is not apparently poles apart in its handling of truth and reality (Goswami; Banerjee and Stober 161; Joshi; Das 404).

India’s post-truth condition stands out as unique in the assertion of mythology in multiple narratives. As Meera Nanda notes, the outstanding emphasis placed on mythology is the salient point that differentiates the post-truth condition of India from its Western counterparts (“Big Lies and Deep Lies”). Even though many societies have forsaken their myths as imaginative stories in the modern world of science and reason, a large sect of the Indian population even today considers their myths to be true accounts of their past. According to Rituparna Sengupta, “mythology has emerged as the very language of public and political discourse in the nation” (1-2). Myths do not lose their charm; in fact, myths have emerged as powerful enough to define the socio-cultural landscape of the nation. Since myths are intricately intertwined with the socio-cultural realms of Indian communities, they exercise a strong emotional hold over the people. Examining the notion of post-truth, Kalpokas contends:

The Enlightenment and the scientific revolution have displaced the primacy of myths with hard facts that, however, cannot have the same emotional, even visceral, appeal. Hence, post-truth does signal something that is both

‘post’ and a return, a re-legitimation of arguments based on their emotional appeal and symbolic value and subjective rather than impersonal truth. (2)

As he discerns, myths hold considerable emotional appeal which renders them a pivotal component in the post-truth discourse, particularly in the context of India. In the post-truth era, where emotional resonance often outweighs factual accuracy, myths provide powerful narratives that shape collective beliefs and perceptions. In India, myths are not merely ancient stories but living traditions that influence contemporary social and political dynamics. They offer a sense of identity and continuity, and connect people to their cultural roots by reinforcing shared values.

Meera Nanda, in her article titled “Big Lies and Deep Lies in Post-Truth India,” distinguishes the Indian post-truth condition from that of the USA or Europe. According to her, one remarkable attribute of widely circulated post-truth narratives in India is their alliance with popular mythology. She observes that India witnesses the use of “... myths turned into certified facts of history and science.” She argues that post-truth narratives in the USA are big lies which could be falsified with the help of factual records; whereas, in India, most of the post-truth claims are prepared out of mythology. Nanda says: “... it rewrites the rules and background assumptions of what constitutes justified true belief” in the first place. Myths are considered “true beliefs” by post-truth proponents. Thus, fact-checking following the standard methods of analysing factual accounts cannot be done as they basically reject all distinction between fact and imagination, and mythology and history.

The significance of mythology makes the post-truth discourse in India more complex and unique. For people, who place heavy significance on myths and

consider them an inseparable part of their lives, myths achieve greater importance than science and logic. Though there exists a wide variety of myths and fables in various parts of India which are related to different religious and cultural groups, Hindu mythology forms the lion's share of Indian mythology. Consequently, Hindu mythology is often used synonymously with Indian mythology, even though the two terms are not synonymous in the strict sense. Hindu mythology encompasses mythical stories from Ithihasas (epics), Puranas, Upanishads and some other regional literatures. Devdutt Pattanaik opines:

Hindu mythology was not the creation of Brahmanical bards; the stories were spawned in the collective imagination that captured the worldview of a people. These were appropriated over time and codified by the socially dominant Brahmins as well as their opponents, the Buddhists and the Jains.
(4-5)

In the post-truth Indian context, supreme significance is laid on this codified Hindu mythology.

In the new millennium, a revival of mythological themes is visible in the literary landscape (Thambi 5; Sengupta 1). According to Dawson Varughese, the genre of mythology-inspired fiction in the new era could be called "Bharati Fantasy" which is created by "twisting," "shaping" and "culturally moulding" the existing genres of fantasy, thriller or historical fiction (*Genre Fiction* 11). He argues that though these novels are written in the fantasy genre, they cannot be categorised as such but rather as "historical fiction" since they significantly make use of Hindu epics (Varughese, *Reading New India* 123). Varughese's observation suggests that

Indian English mythological fiction in the twenty-first century blends myths and history in their narratives; or the demarcation between myth and history is blurred to a great extent. Meera Nanda's reflection on the post-truth narratives where myths turn "into certified facts of history and science" could be read along with the portrayal of myths as history in mythological fiction as well.

Historical interpretation of mythology, also called 'euhemerism' because it was popularised by the Greek philosopher Euhemerus, achieves greater significance in the post-truth discourse of India where mythology plays a pivotal role. According to Nickolas Roubekas, "Euhemerism is not an indigenous term" but "a modern coinage referring to an ancient theory formulated by a largely unknown figure of the early Hellenistic period, namely Euhemerus of Messene" (*Ancient Theory* 1). Euhemerism or the historical interpretation of mythology could be understood as a method of interpreting myths as historical accounts. According to euhemerism, myths originate from real historical figures and events. It is presumed that through retelling, historical accounts get exaggerated and altered, and as a result, historical figures get venerated as gods or superhuman beings. Euhemerism is rooted in the process of deification of human beings, usually kings, through apotheosis—the process of deification through which human beings are deified as gods. Euhemerus distinguished gods into two categories; "the heavenly" gods and "the earthly" gods (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 1). According to him, the heavenly gods are immortal while earthly gods are mortal beings who have received immortal honour and glory through apotheosis. Euhemerus maintains that Greek gods including Uranus and

Zeus were great kings who later received eternal glory through transforming to the status of earthly gods.

Euhemerus' theory of interpretation of mythology is included in his work titled *Hiera Anagraphe (Sacred Inscriptions)*. However, the work survives only in a fragmentary form. The work is not preserved in its entirety and is now known primarily through the summaries and alleged verbatim renditions of later authors. The principal source of the preserved fragments is the first-century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus, who included parts of the *Sacred Inscriptions* in the fifth and sixth books of his *Historical Library*. However, the text from the sixth book survives only as a summary by Eusebius of Caesarea, a third and fourth-century CE writer, in his *Preparation for the Gospel*. Another crucial intermediary was Quintus Ennius, the father of Roman poetry, who translated the work into Latin as *Euhemerus sive Sacra Historia*. Though Ennius' translation is lost, fragments are available through the writings of Lactantius in his *Divine Institutes*. Thus, the *Sacred Inscriptions*, written around the end of the fourth or early third century BCE, are accessible through the texts of various authors spanning from the third century BCE to the fourth century CE. This 700-year period of application and reinterpretation significantly influenced the transmission and comprehension of Euhemerus' work and theory (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 18).

Euhemerus viewed myths as records of the past and maintained that myths had accumulated mysticism upon retelling through exaggerations. He argues that the Greek god Zeus was a historical king who had lived and died on earth. He was venerated as a god by his people and his stories were exaggerated in retellings.

His theory held that there were two groups of gods: the earthly (Olympian) and the heavenly ones. The latter were eternal and could be observed in nature; the former, benevolent and powerful kings. The most notorious of the gods, Zeus, was deified while he was alive, whereas his ancestor, Uranus was deified posthumously. (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 1)

Though the doctrine of historical interpretation of mythology did not originate with Euhemerus, it is commonly associated with his name due to his notable influence on subsequent mythographers.

In the Indian context, the distinction between myth and history is so much blurred that “historians, anthropologists, and sociologists often turn to the tales of the Itihasas and Puranas to understand what could have happened in India between 1500 B.C.E. and A.D. 500” since the lack of other material evidence (Pattanaik 162). As Pattanaik observes, “Hindu scriptures rarely differentiate between traditional beliefs and historical data. Hence the oldest collections of myths are known as Itihasas (histories) and Puranas (chronicles)” (161). Consequently, myths are often interpreted as records of historical events and personas in India. However, historians do not consider myths as “records of facts” since they lack evidence (161). Moreover, myths are not uniform across all places; they exist in diverse forms and undergo alterations depending on the region and community. Discussing on various versions of the epic *Ramayana*, A K Ramanujan states:

The number of *Ramayanas* and the range of their influence in South and Southeast Asia over the past twenty-five hundred years or more are astonishing. ... Sanskrit alone contains some twenty-five or more tellings

belonging to various narrative genres (epics, *kavyas* or ornate poetic compositions, *puranas* or old mythological stories, and so forth). ... Camille Bulcke (1950), a student of the *Ramayana*, counted three hundred retellings. ... Obviously, these hundreds of tellings differ from one another. (133-134)

Similar to the case of retellings of *Ramayana*, as Ramanujan points out, there are various retellings of other mythological events and stories. Consequently, attempts to regard myths as historical records become debatable.

In the modern era, several scholars have approached and analysed Euhemerus' theory in various ways. Roubekas, in his 2014 article titled "What is Euhemerism? A Brief History of Research and Some Persisting Questions" attempts to consolidate the various interpretations of euhemerism by scholars. His 2017 work entitled *An Ancient Theory of Religion: From Antiquity to the Present*, delves comprehensively into the concept of euhemerism, elucidating its multifaceted dimensions. According to Roubekas, euhemerism, first and foremost, is a theory about the origin of *Greek religion and gods* [emphasis added] (*Ancient Theory* 26). Giovanna Vallauri considers euhemerism as a response to the decline of traditional religious beliefs which led to apotheosis in the Hellenistic tradition. Franz Susemihl claims that Euhemerus' theory could be recognised as a satire on the Hellenistic tradition of deification. Peter M. Frazer identifies euhemerism as royal propaganda that promoted the deification of the Ptolemaic dynasty. John Ferguson and Marianne Zumschlinge consider Euhemerus a utopian thinker rather than a religious theorist. The Christian version of euhemerism primarily focuses on Christianity's superiority over the Greek religion.

Most of the existing studies on post-truth emphasise the socio-political condition of Western countries, especially the US and Britain. *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* (2004) by Ralph Keyes and *America's Post-Truth Phenomenon: When Feelings and Opinions Trump Facts and Evidence* (2018) edited by C. G. Prado examines the socio-political landscape of the Western world which makes it post-truth in nature. Matthew D'Ancona's *Post-Truth: The New War on Truth* (2017), Daniel Levitin's *Weaponized Lies: How to Think Critically in the Post-Truth Era* (2017) and Evan Davis's *Post-Truth: Why We have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do about It* (2017) also discuss the post-truth condition of the world and its politics. While Lee McIntyre's *Post-Truth* (2018) attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the term, Ignas Kalpokas tries to theorise the notion in *A Political Theory of Post-Truth* (2019). Christopher Schaberg's *The Work of Literature in an Age of Post-Truth* (2018) is an attempt to analyse the nature of literature produced in the post-truth era from a personal point of view. Conversely, academic writings and scholarly articles on India's post-truth condition are yet to come forth. Existing discussions include *Post-Truth: The Brand New Republic* (2022) written by Syed Ali Mujtaba and a few newspaper articles such as "India's Post-Truth Society" (2018) written by Swaraj Paul Barooah, "Are Indian Politicians Now Creating Post-Truth Narratives?" (2018) by Abhishek Annicca, "India has been a Post-Truth Society for Years (and maybe the West has Too)" (2019) by Ranjit Goswami, and "The Contours of India's Post-Truth State" (2021) by Ravi Joshi. Meera Nanda, in "Big Lies and Deep Lies in Post-Truth India" (2022) makes an attempt to distinguish the post-truth phenomenon in India from its counterparts in the Western world. Maya Ranganathan explores

how new nationalistic narratives are constructed in the post-truth era in her article titled “Re-scripting the Nation in ‘Post-Truth’ Era: The Indian Story” (2019). No studies have been identified that particularly examine the role and significance of narratives in literary fiction in post-truth India and this study aims to initiate such a detailed analysis.

The existing body of literature on select mythological fictions—the Shiva Trilogy, *The Krishna Key* (*Krishna Key*) and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished—The Story of Ravana and His People* (*Asura*)—predominantly centres its attention on the process by which myths and mythological personas are deconstructed in these literary works. The Shiva Trilogy has attracted critical attention, notably with regard to its profound engagement in mythological deconstruction. Suresh Kumar in “Revitalizing Indigenous Culture: A Study of Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy” (2017) examines how the trilogy revitalises Indian culture and introduces young Indian readers to their heritage through a blend of myth and scientific reasoning. In “Rewriting Myth: A Critical Analysis of Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva Trilogy*,” (2016) Vikram Singh emphasises on Tripathi’s rewriting of myths suggesting that the trilogy modernises traditional narratives to reflect contemporary ethical questions. Representation of female characters in the trilogy is analysed by various research articles including “A Critical Study on Women Characters of Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy” (2017), “Ancient Myth versus Modern Myth: A Study of the Mythical Characters in Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi” (2024), and “The Women Characters of Amish Tripathi: A Postfeminist Perspective” (2024), by Anup Nair, Nilam Joshi and Prakash Vekaria, and Saroj Bala and Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi

respectively. While Dharmendra Kumar discusses the philosophical underpinnings in Tripathi's work, focusing on themes of karma and dharma as explored through the protagonist's journey in "Mythopoeia and Modernity: Reimagining Traditional Indian Mythology through Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*" (2023), G. Sharmely delves into the ethical dilemmas faced by Shiva in "Representation of Lord Shiva as Man in Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*" (2016).

M. Jayabharathi employs a comparative methodology to juxtapose *Krishna Key* with Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* as theological thrillers in her article "Displacement of Myths in *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Krishna Key*: A Comparative Study" (2016). "1000 Voices in Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key*" (2017) by Santini Pathinathan et al. is an attempt to analyse the novel through the lens of Bakhtin's notion of Dialogism. Aiswarya R. Rao attempts to read *Krishna Key* as a work of historiography in "*The Krishna Key*: Unlocking and Retrieving the History and Culture of India" (2015).

Dais Maria James in "A Subaltern Reading of Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*" (2015) and Ruchika Jain in "The Becoming of Ravana in A. Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*" (2021) explore Neelakantan's approach to anthropomorphise Ravana, presenting him as a multi-dimensional character who is both a tyrant and a victim of societal structures. Geethu Lekshmi R. and Beena S. Nair in "Ravanayana: Negotiating the Political and Cultural Discourse of the Vanquished in Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*" (2017) and Aswathi S. Nair in "The Tale of the Victor to the Tale of the Vanquished" (2016) focus on how *Asura* negotiates cultural identity and political power by

challenging the mainstream demonisation of Ravana. Natawan Wongchalard in “Revisiting *Ramayana* through Oppositional Telling of Anand Neelakantan’s *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012)” (2016) discusses how *Asura* deconstructs the grand narratives of the epic by foregrounding the voices and experiences of those traditionally marginalised voices in myths. Pushpendra Singh Rathore and Vikram Singh discuss how Neelakantan employs a dual narrative to explore themes of power, oppression and justice in their articles titled “Study of Narratives in Anand Neelakantan’s Novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*” (2021) and “Breaking the Grand Narratives: Re-reading *Ramayana* as *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*” (2017) respectively.

The existing works on the Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* provide a framework for understanding the reinterpretation of myths and their adaptation into contemporary narratives. However, there appears to be a significant research gap in analysing these works in the light of the post-truth discourse. The existing studies tend to focus on the subversion of traditional myths without specifically linking them to the broader socio-cultural context of the post-truth age. The proposed research aims to bridge this gap by specifically examining how these mythological fictions resonate with and reflect the post-truth discourse. The purposive sampling method is adopted for the study to focus on the historicization and rationalisation of the divine beings/gods or demonic beings in myths. The study follows qualitative research methodology and offers in-depth textual analysis of the select works. The notion of post-truth and historical interpretation of mythology are employed as the

framework to analyse primary texts. This research investigates how the select mythological fictions reflect and engage with the prevalent post-truth discourse.

The primary objective of this study is to explore the nature and significance of mythological fiction in the context of the post-truth discourse. The thesis attempts to comprehend how the select works absorb and respond to certain notions and themes intrinsic to the post-truth narratives. It aims to examine how the select works historicize myths by integrating mythological elements within specific historical periods like the Indus civilisation and Vedic civilisation. Furthermore, the research investigates how the primary texts further anthropomorphise mythological characters, portraying divine or semi-divine figures as relatable human beings, thereby making ancient myths more accessible and relevant to modern readers. It also analyses how these texts rationalise myths by presenting them as repositories of wisdom and scientific knowledge. The study makes use of a range of works related to Indian mythology including *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* edited by Denise Cush, et al., John Dowson's *Classical Dictionary of Hindu Mythology and Religion, Geography, History*, Vettam Mani's *Puranic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Puranic Literature* and George M. Williams's *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*. The thesis draws on the works of Irfan Habib— *The Indus Civilization: Including Other Copper Age Cultures and History of Language Change till c. 1500 B. C.*— and Romila Thapar— *Which of Us Are Indians? Rethinking the Concepts of Our Origins, The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History, The Penguin History of Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300*—as key sources for historical discussions.

The first among the primary texts, the Shiva Trilogy is written by Amish Tripathi. Tripathi, one of the fastest-selling authors in India, is a former diplomat and banker. He debuted as an author in 2010, publishing *The Immortals of Meluha*. He has penned 11 books including both fiction and non-fiction. His notable works include *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku* (2015), *Sita: Warrior of Mithila* (2017), *Immortal India: Young Country, Timeless Civilisation* (2017), *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta* (2019), *Dharma: Decoding the Epics for a Meaningful Life* (2020), and *War of Lanka* (2022).

The Shiva Trilogy, Tripathi's first literary venture, is a series that reimagines the god Lord Shiva as a mortal Tibetan chieftain whose fate leads him to become a divine figure. Spanning three novels—*The Immortals of Meluha* (*Meluha*), *The Secret of the Nagas* (*Nagas*), and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (*Vayuputras*)—the trilogy blends elements of myth, history, and fantasy to craft a gripping narrative that combines elements of adventure, mystery and romance, set against the richly detailed backdrop of ancient India. *Meluha* is the first novel in the series which introduces Shiva, a Tibetan tribal leader, and his tribe who are invited to live in the kingdom of Meluha—a nearly perfect empire. Upon drinking the Somras, a revered potion in Meluha, Shiva's throat turns blue which is seen as a fulfilment of an ancient prophecy identifying him as the Neelkanth, a divine hero destined to save Meluha from its problems. Despite his initial scepticism, Shiva embraces his role as the prophesied saviour, after witnessing the prosperity of Meluha and thinking of the impending danger over the empire. Meanwhile, Shiva falls in love with Princess Sati, a strong and brave Meluhan warrior and the daughter of emperor Daksha.

Driven by duty, Shiva decides to help the Meluhans in their war against the Chandravanshis to bring peace to the land. As he leads the charge, he begins to uncover dark secrets about the enemies, including surprising truths about the feared Nagas who possess abilities that seem both extraordinary and sinister.

Nagas, the second novel in the trilogy, follows Shiva as he seeks to uncover the truth about his enemies, the Nagas—a deformed and mysterious clan who strike terror in the hearts of Meluhans. His quest leads him to the vibrant city of Kashi, Branga and later into the Dandak forest, where he discovers the land of Nagas and their secrets. The trilogy's concluding part, *Vayuputras*, portrays how Shiva is convinced of the negative effects of the Somras. Shiva's journey against evil takes him across the landscape of ancient India, seeking support and gathering forces from various regions. Shiva prepares for a war against those who continue to support the use of Somras, including some he once called allies. In a devastating turn of events, Sati—Shiva's beloved wife—is killed by a gang arranged by Daskha to eliminate Shiva. Overwhelmed by loss, Shiva makes the drastic decision to use the Pashupatiatra, a powerful and destructive divine weapon, against Meluha, destroying the empire.

Ashwin Sanghi is one of the best-selling Indian English writers. His works include *The Rozabal Line* (2007), *Chanakya's Chant* (2010), *The Krishna Key* (2012), *The Sialkot Saga* (2016), *Keepers of the Kalachakra* (2018), *The Vault of Vishnu* (2020), and *The Magicians of Mazda* (2022). He has co-written *Private India* (sold in the US as *City on Fire*) and *Private Delhi* (sold in the US as *Count to Ten*) with James Patterson. Sanghi's *Krishna Key* blends ancient Indian mythology with

the thrilling dynamics of a contemporary murder mystery. The novel follows the journey of Ravi Mohan Saini, a historian and professor, who is thrust into a whirlwind of adventure and danger when he is wrongfully accused of the murder of his close friend, Anil Varshney, an archaeologist who had uncovered artefacts that might rewrite ancient Indian history. As Saini attempts to clear his name, he is assisted by Priya Ratnani, his doctoral student and friend, who aids him in deciphering the clues that could lead them to the true murderer and their motive. Varshney's research, left in clues meant for Saini, suggests that Krishna was not just a mythological figure but a historical person. The clues lead Saini and his allies across India's ancient landscapes, from the ruins of the city of Dwaraka to the Somnath Temple, and finally to Mount Kailash and the Taj Mahal. As the narrative unfolds, Taarak Vakil—who believes himself to be the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, Kalki—is exposed as the murderer. And, Priya is unmasked as Mataji, a religious zealot with grand ambitions who prepares Taarak Vakil to complete her task of finding the secret of Krishna. The novel culminates with the understanding that the true legacy of Krishna—represented by the Philosopher's Stone—is not just the physical or miraculous properties attributed to it but the spread of knowledge and enlightenment it symbolises.

Anand Neelakantan, known for his mythological retellings, is an Indian novelist, columnist, screenwriter and public speaker. With over 15 books to his credit, including 14 in English and one in Malayalam, his works have been translated into many languages including Hindi, Tamil, Bengali and Indonesian. His notable works include *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*

(2013), *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* (2015), *Bhoomija: Sita* (2017), *The Rise of Sivagami* (2017), *Shanta: The Story of Rama's Sister* (2017), *Ravana's Sister: Meenakshi* (2018), *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018), *Chaturanga* (2020), *Queen of Mahishmathi* (2020), *The Very Extremely Most Naughty Asura tales for Kids* (2020), and *Valmiki's Women* (2021). *Asura* by Neelakantan is a retelling of the epic *Ramayana* from the perspective of the vanquished rather than the victors. Through the narratives of Ravana, the king of Lanka, and Bhadra, a common Asura, the novel explores the complexities of moral ambiguity, justice, and the challenging nature of evil. Ravana, in Neelakantan's rendition, is a scholar, a capable ruler, and a devout follower of Shiva. His journey from an ostracised child to the mighty king of Lanka is marked by battles, the establishment of a powerful empire, and his eventual obsession with Sita which leads to his downfall. Parallel to Ravana's story, the novel portrays the story of Bhadra, a common man born in the lowest strata of Asura society. Bhadra's journey is one of survival, resilience, and an unyielding quest for recognition and revenge against those he holds responsible for his sufferings.

The thesis is structured to explore the intersection of mythological retellings and the post-truth milieu. It is designed to unfold over five chapters including the introduction and conclusion. The introductory chapter lays the foundation and methodology framework for the thesis. It begins with the thesis statement and progresses to discuss the significance of mythology in the post-truth discourse and the importance of historical interpretation of mythology, setting the stage for subsequent explorations. It goes on to define the concept of post-truth and its

characteristics. The Introduction outlines the theories, review of literature, research gap, methodology, summary of primary texts and chapterisation.

The three core chapters engage in a critical examination of the select novels, focusing on how the process of historicizing myths is intricately woven into these narratives. The core chapters of the thesis are divided into three, corresponding to the different phases of the historical interpretation of mythology—associating myths with specific historical periods, anthropomorphising mythological characters, and presenting myths as repositories of ancient scientific wisdom. The second chapter, “Reimagining the Past: Historicizing Mythology,” explores how the select texts historicize myths by intertwining mythological and historical timelines. The chapter analyses the interplay between myth and history and evaluates the ways in which mythological elements are recontextualised within specific historical frameworks to offer new interpretations. This analysis will highlight how the select novels respond to and reflect upon prevalent post-truth narratives, especially those concerning nationalism and ethnic identity. Theoretical frameworks from renowned historians like Romila Thapar and Irfan Habib regarding history will be employed to dissect how these narratives reconstruct mythological events and figures within historical frameworks. Additionally, theories on nationalism by George Orwell and Anthony D. Smith will help analyse how the primary texts negotiate the complex terrain of national identity.

The third chapter, “From Deities to Humans: Anthropomorphising Mythological Characters,” takes a closer look at how the select novels embrace the process of anthropomorphisation of mythological characters as part of the historical

interpretation of mythology. This anthropomorphisation process, which is an integral aspect of the historicization of mythology, often involves attributing complex emotions, moral dilemmas, and personal conflicts to the characters, making them more relatable and reflective of contemporary societal issues. The chapter analyses and compares how mythological characters are demystified and anthropomorphised in select mythological fictions. It also examines how the contemporary portrayal of mythological figures diverges from traditional mythology.

The fourth chapter, “Myth And Science: Rationalising Mythology,” investigates how select novels incorporate scientific jargon and concepts within the framework of mythological stories. This chapter explores how the integration of scientific explanations contributes to the narratives’ credibility and appeal. This analysis will delve into how the use of scientific terminology and concepts serves to bridge the gap between ancient myths and modern scientific understanding.

Finally, the concluding chapter puts forth the insights gained from the analyses in the preceding chapters. It reflects on how mythological fictions reflect and converse with the post-truth discourse. The conclusion is followed by the recommendation chapter which offers suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Reimagining the Past: Historicizing Mythology

The post-truth discourse in Indian English fiction distinguishes itself through its employment of myths, subsequently elevating the significance of mythological fiction. Following the historical interpretation of mythology, the Shiva Trilogy written by Amish Tripathi, *Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi and *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan attempt to re-narrate myths through a more historical and rational lens, grounding them in a context that aligns with modern historical sensibilities.

Mythological novels of the contemporary era “often blend history with retelling of mythology and often revert the widely believed historical facts. ... The quest for an ‘Indian past’ in these novels, often looking through a mythological lens, creates a possibility for reimagining the nation and its history” (Thambi 1). The Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura*, drawing inspiration from myths, recreate a plausible historical past of a nation of glory and sophistication.

Contemporary Indian English mythological fiction often reflects a sense of national pride embedded in the post-truth discourse, offering an idealised portrayal of the ancient past as depicted in mythology. The Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* are often identified as *historical* mythological fiction rather than mere mythological fiction. Vikram Singh argues that the Shiva Trilogy has “established a fictionalized historical account in Indian fictional writing by rendering the recreation of the traditional myths through the means of the fantasy mode” (149). Aiswarya R Rao reads *Krishna Key* as “a work of historiography and as a literature invoking

nationalism, by reviving our ancient literature and history” (74). According to M Jayabharathi, *Krishna Key* attempts to establish the scientific superiority of ancient Indian civilisations and it “indulges in glorification of the past to bring about radical understanding of religion” (26).

Ignas Kalpokas emphasises the role of “shared collective memory,” such as myths, as an integral component in constructing the emotional appeal of post-truth narratives. In his words, post-truth narratives do not create their emotional appeal from the vacuum, rather the appeal is acquired based on

... something shared, such as selected episodes of collective memory and experiences of the past, however inadequate, truncated, and mutilated, as in nostalgia for a collective fantasy of an alleged golden age to which the community must now return, as in imperial Britain of the Brexiteers or some ‘great’ America of the past. (28)

Yuval Noah Harari identifies myth as a fundamental element in human associations and states: “[a]ny large-scale human cooperation - whether a modern state, a medieval church, an ancient city or an archaic tribe - is rooted in common myths that exist only in people’s collective imagination.” According to him, “[s]tates are rooted in common national myths” which enable people to believe in their belongingness to particular nationalities (*A Brief History* 30). Anthony D. Smith also asserts that national identity is “one kind of collective identity” that is “so important and widespread today” (Smith 18). In the Indian context, a shared collective memory of an ancient past of the nation, in the form of mythology, enriches the post-truth narratives and it often works along with the concept of nationalism.

The glorification of the bygone era is central to the post-truth paradigm (Kalpokas 28). However, this past glory referred to in the Indian context has its roots in mythology rather than history. The celebrated bygone era is not the historically proven past of the land, but the past portrayed in popular mythology. As Meera Nanda argues, nationalists in contemporary India “set their political compass by the vision of a mythic golden age. These are the prophets who, even as they march forward, keep their faces turned backwards towards an imagined past ...” (*Prophets* 1). When mythology intertwines with history, the foundational elements of the nation-state, including its history, culture, and ideology, undergo significant transformations. Despite India as a nation being officially recognised as a secular, sovereign republic since its establishment in 1947, the mythological concept of the “great India” remains an ethnoreligious entity. Nation, as conceptualised by Benedict Anderson, is “an imagined political community” because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). According to Anthony D. Smith, a nation could be defined as “a named human population sharing a historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members” (14). In contemporary mythological fiction, the concept of nation is often explored along with the interpretation of the nation’s past incorporating a blend of myth and history. Challenging the acknowledged versions of history, they reimagine the history of the nation in mythological terms “by counterpoising the existing accounts of the history of ancient India” (Thambi 2). As Smith argues, the line

between history and myth is often blurred and consequently, myth enters the “historical consciousness” of people (22).

Stuart Sim argues that nationalism plays a pivotal role in post-truth discourse, asserting “[t]he rise of the far right throughout the US and Europe has brought in its wake an upsurge of nationalism that is ... extremist in its aims, and has no intention of respecting or cherishing differences and cultural diversity” (147). Identifying nationalistic fervour as a key element in post-truth rhetoric and politics, he states:

The rise in nationalism ... tends to be more about national identity in a rather old-fashioned sense, with a white supremacist bias coming to be very noticeable in the various nationalisms asserting themselves in Europe, echoing that already present in the American alt-right movement, with its hatred of the Black Lives Matter movement. This is an identity politics that the right can endorse; one that is based on the premise that it is superior to all others. (Sim 148)

Nationalism occasionally tends to carry a negative connotation due to its excessive focus on asserting the superiority of specific ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures over others. George Orwell’s conceptualisation of nationalism in his 1945 essay, “Notes on Nationalism,” mirrors its latent function in the post-truth era. Orwell redefines nationalism, distancing it from the conventional understanding, suggesting that it does not always pertain to the idea of a nation but rather encompasses one’s negative sentiments towards a specific nation, group, or ideology. According to him, nationalism serves primarily as a divisive tool,

classifying individuals into “good” or “bad” groups. In the guise of nationalism, people align themselves with a particular “nation or other unit” and work for its interests without critically evaluating the morality of their actions. He argues, in the game of power, “if the chosen unit is an actual country,” the so-called nationalist will try to establish the superiority of her nation not only in terms of “military power and political virtue, but in art, literature, sport, structure of the language, the physical beauty of the inhabitants, and perhaps even in climate, scenery and cooking.” And in the post-truth scenario, these kinds of relentless attempts to hail one’s nation, culture, religion and language as superior to others are so evident. The glorification of the past, the splendour of ancient civilisations, and the invocation of scientific advancements from a bygone era have often been employed in post-truth narratives, drawing upon people’s deep emotional attachment to their country and leveraging national sentiment as a means to win over people.

History is a fundamental aspect of nationalism (Tharoor 46), and a significant element of post-truth narratives, because the feeling of a shared sense of unity is essential for cementing the nationalist sentiment. Analysing the significance of history in nationalist discourse, Shashi Tharoor comments:

Since the project of national unity which is indispensable to the expression of nationalism requires both a shared sense of cohesion, ethnicity or brotherhood, and an identifiable, secure, recognized territory, all nationalisms seek both such fraternity, and such a homeland. At the same time, to justify nationalistic zeal, both are required to be constructed on a long history—real or imagined—of collective experience. This is what

makes history so important to the very idea of nationalism and so crucial to nation-building. (46)

Subsequently, history attains a more decisive role in the post-truth scenario.

G. Aloysius has identified three explicit functions of invoking the past in the process of nation-building.

One, to have legitimacy to the nation which is made to appear as always having or nearly always existed; two, to indicate the ideological direction the nation is to take in future with its past as the model; and three, to draw the desired inclusion and exclusion within society, culture, and history. (168)

The select mythological fictional narratives extend the concept of India far beyond the conventional boundaries of time and space, tracing its roots back to the Indus and Vedic civilisations. These narratives create a notion of the immemorial existence of an ethnocentric nation whose existence predates the establishment of the modern nation-state in 1947. Consequently, the notion of the nation transcends the political and geographical boundaries, harking back to the establishment of ancient acropolises during the Bronze Age. Despite differing political and geographical landscapes, this ancient India is upheld as a timeless entity, embodying the essence of a civilisation that stretches across millennia.

According to Anthony D. Smith, the non-Western model of nation is intrinsically “ethnic” which emphasises on “community of birth and native culture” (11). As Stuart Sim contends, contemporary post-truth narratives of nationalism often emphasise ethnic superiority rather than adhering to nationalism based on

territorial delineations (148). The contemporary nationalistic discourse in India is also identified as ethnoreligious nationalism (Jaffrelot 28; Tharoor 255) where the surge of ethnic pride becomes a potent force, fueled by the deliberate juxtaposition of one ethnicity as superior to another. Ethnocentrism, as William Graham Sumner defines, is “the technical name” for the perspective “in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it” (17).

The Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi, *Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi and *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan perceive mythological narratives through a historical lens, weave narratives around mythological figures, and provide a historical backdrop for their plots, placing the characters into strictly defined historical time frames. Amish Tripathi has placed the story of Shiva in the 20th century BC, an age that is counted as the zenith of the Indus Valley civilisation according to historians. By doing so, the novelist draws a parallel between the historical Indus Valley civilisation and the fictional Meluhan society and finds a historical backdrop for his story. Meluha, described as “the *land of pure life*” and the land of hope for Shiva and his tribe, is shown as a kingdom with Kashmir Valley as its border province. The sophistication of the city of Meluha is emphasised by juxtaposing the city with Shiva’s native land in the hill area. Mount Kailasa (Kailash) is referred to as the abode of Shiva in the myths (Cush et al. 534). The trilogy also presents Mount Kailash as the native place of Shiva situated near to the Manasarovar Lake (Tripathi, *Meluha* 1). According to myths, *ganas* are the companions of Shiva (B. Debroy and D. Debroy 20). Tripathi has used a similar term in his trilogy to denote Shiva’s tribe –“Guna,” which resembles the term *gana*. The *ganas* are portrayed as people who

are forced to engage in continuous war with another tribe to ensure their access to the Manasarovar Lake. In Shiva's words, the huts of gunas are "luxurious compared to others in their land" since "a grown man could actually stand upright in them" and the huts "could withstand the harsh mountain winds for nearly three years before surrendering to the elements" (Tripathi, *Meluha* 3-4). Accustomed to a lifestyle that constantly involves battling the forces of nature and rival tribes, Shiva and his people find Meluha to be an entirely different environment—one that appears to them as an ideal and harmonious society.

Meluha is depicted as a well-developed civilisation in all facets of life including city management, weaponry, architecture, technology, healthcare and so on. The Meluhan society, as it is portrayed by Tripathi in the novel, exhibits many traits of the historical Harappan civilisation and Mohenjo Daro. These civilisations were noted for their urban planning, well-executed drainage system and water management.

As is the case with practically every Indus town of any size, Mohenjo Daro was laid out as a planned city. The so-called 'acropolis' (high town) or 'citadel' was built upon a large platform, constructed with walls of dried mud-brick to retain the infills behind. ... The initial platforms were some 10 metres high, but were further raised or extended from time to time: these platforms enabled houses in the city to be built above the flood level. Spaces for roads were marked well before houses were built, so that Mohenjo Daro had long broad roads (unpaved) running parallel with other roads, with lanes meeting them at right angles. (Habib 38)

Meluhan cities, including Srinagar, are portrayed as planned cities built on platforms, which resemble the features of cities in Indus valley civilisation.

Entering the border city of Meluha, Srinagar, Shiva and his people are astonished to see cities built on platforms.

Srinagar had been raised upon a massive platform of almost a hundred hectares in size. The platform, built of earth, towered almost five metres high. On top of the platform were the city walls, which were another twenty metres in height and four metres thick. The simplicity and brilliance of building an entire city on a platform astounded the Gunas. It was a strong protection against enemies who would have to fight up a fort wall which was essentially solid ground. The platform served another vital purpose: it raised the ground level of the city, an extremely effective strategy against the recurrent floods in this land. (Tripathi, *Meluha* 11)

Shiva observes that Devagiri, the Meluhan capital, was also built on giant platforms and the “city was divided into a grid of square blocks by the paved streets. There were footpaths on the side for pedestrians, lanes marked on the street for traffic in different directions” (62).

Shiva also notices that the baked bricks used for construction in Meluha follow a standard dimension. Answering Shiva’s query regarding whether the bricks are made per some standard process, Nandi clarifies: “All the bricks in Meluha are made as per specifications and guidelines given by the Chief Architect of the empire” (63). “Baked bricks, as well as sun-dried mud-bricks of standard size, with

sides in the ratio of 1:2:4” are identified as another defining feature of Indus Civilisation (Habib 14). The advanced drainage system and the Great Bath, one of the ancient structures found among the remains of the Indus Valley civilisation, are also mentioned as specific features of Meluha which historians count as features of the mature Indus civilisation (40-41). According to Irfan Habib,

... a remarkably careful drainage system was laid out throughout the city of Mohenjo Daro. Each house had its waste water running out, sometimes through terracotta pipes fitted together, into a cess-pit which connected with the drain running alongside the road. The drains along the main roads could be covered, and sometimes had man-high, corbelled, burnt-brick roofing, to enable cleaners to enter them. (40)

In *Shiva Trilogy*, Nandi mentions the underground drainage system in Meluha which takes out all the wastewater and keeps the camp clean and hygienic in one of his conversations with Shiva (Tripathi, *Meluha* 14). When he enters Devagiri for the first time, Shiva notices “covered drains” in the city (64). He observes, “same block structures that dominated all of Meluha were to be found in the royal citadel as well. The only magnificent structure was to the far right and sported the sign ‘Great Public Bath’” (67). The Great Bath, according to Irfan Habib, was built within the acropolis of Mohenjo Daro (41). Hence, by placing the historical Great Bath in the city of Devagiri, Amish Tripathi establishes his fictional Meluha as the historical Mohenjo Daro. Hariyupa, or the City of Hari, named in the novel, thus, could be understood as a reference to the historical Harappa itself.

According to Tripathi, the inhabitants of Meluha had acquired knowledge of cotton cultivation and copper metallurgy and established a monetary system employing coinage for trade transactions. According to historians, “dyed woven cotton recovered from Mohenjo Daro constitute one of the two earliest known examples of cotton cloth in the world” (Habib 34). Tracing the history of coinage in India, Shankar Goyal argues, “[m]ost numismatists now agree with the view that though metallic pieces of fixed weight might have been in circulation in the Later Vedic age, coinage proper originated in India in the sixth-fifth centuries B. C. (or a little earlier or a little later” (153). However, according to the Shiva Trilogy, coinage was well established during the period of Shiva in India. The Branga coin, which was made of gold, had imprints of King Chandraketu, the king of Branga, on one side and “a river map of their land on the other” (Tripathi, *Nagas* 15). Shiva, hailing from the mountainous regions that lie beyond Meluha’s borders, encounters many of these materials and technologies for the first time, thereby experiencing a profound sense of bewilderment upon encountering garments crafted from cotton, among other novelties. Thus, the Shiva Trilogy emphasises the technological advancement of Meluhan society over other settlements that lie far away from the Indus and Saraswati (Sarasvati) bases.

Meluhan society is shown to be very conscious of health and hygiene. They arrange a seven-day quarantine facility for each tribe that comes to Meluha for the first time as a preventive method. Nandi explains to Shiva that “the quarantine is just a precaution” against diseases because “[s]ometimes, immigrants may come in with new diseases” and the doctors in Meluha will be able to cure such ailments by

observing the quarantined people (Tripathi, *Meluha* 16). When a fever outbreaks among the Guna tribe after they reach the new land, Ayurvati, the doctor, instructs Shiva to take a bath immediately. And he was strictly instructed to use the strange cake-like substance that the Meluhans said was a soap to rub the body clean” (22).

Iron is introduced in the novel as the newfound metal and thereby, Tripathi tries to cement the historical time frame of the novel to the Iron Age in history. “The city gates were made of a metal that Shiva had never seen before. Nandi clarified that they were made of iron, a new metal that had just been discovered” (64).

According to Romila Thapar, the composition and compilation of the Vedic corpus can be roughly dated to 1500-500 BCE and the availability of iron artefacts dates back to around 1000 BCE (*The Penguin History* xiii). Since Tripathi claims that the story of Shiva takes place in 1200 BCE, it clearly fits into the historical time frame of Vedic civilisation in India, however, not to the early Indus Valley civilisation or the “Mature Indus Civilisation” which was in existence before the Iron Age. While 2600-2500 BCE is considered the establishment and spread of the Indus civilisation and 2500-2000 BCE is counted as the Mature or Main period of the civilisation, 2000-1900 BCE marks the fall of the Indus settlement (Habib 66). However, Tripathi blends the characteristics of both the Mature Indus civilisation and the Vedic civilisation in the portrayal of Meluha. The Meluhans are shown as followers of Vedic tradition and Vedas and *yagnas* are mentioned several times in the Shiva Trilogy. Brahaspati, the chief scientist in Meluha, in one of his conversations with Shiva, refers to *Rig Veda* as their “preeminent scripture” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 18). Gopal, the chief of the Vasudev tribe, also makes reference to *Rig Veda* (365).

Thus, by portraying Meluha in resemblance with historical Indus civilisation and Vedic civilisation, Tripathi finds a historical footing for his fictional story. By fixing the time frame to a particular era, instead of employing a fictional time frame, Tripathi creates an aura that his story bears historical elements and authenticity. Portraying Shiva, the mythological character, in a historical time frame, Tripathi brings a sense of historicity to the character and his story. Tripathi has chosen a particular time frame in history to validate the story of Shiva, the deified man. Along with that, he creates a bygone era of glory and superiority.

In a similar vein, Ashwin Sanghi's *Krishna Key* also employs the historical Indus Valley civilisation in the historicization of myths. *Krishna Key*, at the outset, is an investigation thriller which inquires into the identity and motive of a serial killer. However, as the story progresses, the novel delves into narratives related to ancient history and mythology. Though the major events in *Krishna Key* are set in the modern world, the novel assumes that Krishna, the mythological character, had lived during the Indus civilisation. The major characters in *Krishna Key* attempt to establish the historicity of the mythological character Krishna and trace his existence to the Indus civilisation. Notably, *Krishna Key* considers the Indus Civilisation as the same as the Vedic civilisation in which Krishna lived once. Anil Varshney, who is described as India's youngest linguist and symbolist in *Krishna Key*, is shown as an expert who had "shot to instant fame when he succeeded in deciphering several ancient hieroglyphs from the Indus Valley civilisation" (Sanghi 2). Varshney argues that his studies at Kalibangan, a site of the Indus civilisation, prove that Krishna lived during the Indus civilisation period (34).

Anand Neelakantan also sets the Indus Valley civilisation and the later Vedic civilisation as the backdrop of his novel. However, unlike Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, he differentiates Indus civilisation from Vedic civilisation. *Asura* is a deconstructive reading of the epic *Ramayana* where Ravana is the protagonist. *Asura* portrays the story of Ravana from his own viewpoint as well as Bhadra, a common man who also belongs to the Asura race. In *Asura*, the story of Ravana takes place several years after the conquest of the Indus Valley civilisation by nomadic tribes from a faraway land. Anand Neelakantan presents Asura as the primitive tribe of India who were roaming as hunters for a long period in history and later settled down along the river banks. He opines that the Indus Valley civilisation would have been established by the Asuras who were the inhabitants of the land. According to him, “the Asuras were a casteless society and had a highly democratic set up where an elected council, instead of a king, held actual power” (Neelakantan 25). The old Asura tales, as remembered by Ravana, orate about the great civilisations built by the Asura race that “sprawled from the Indus in the west to the Brahmaputra in the east, and from the Himalayas in the north to the Narmada in the south” (25). According to him, the civilisation that Asuras had built was on the banks of the Saraswati and Indus (208). They built roads, hospitals and drainage systems and established themselves as one of the greatest empires in the world at one point in time. The references to the great civilisation set up by Asuras centuries ago, resemble the historical Indus Valley civilisation. According to the novel, Asuras, the indigenous people of the land had established the Indus Valley civilisation and later, Devas, the immigrants conquered the empire of Asuras. Interweaving mythology with history, the select novels establish a historical

foundation for their characters and their associated myths. Anchoring the narratives in a specific time period also provides a sense of believability.

By portraying Lord Manu as the forefather of all Indians, Amish Tripathi puts forth an “imputed common ancestry” for the nation which then becomes a “fictive ‘super-family’” that boasts of its “pedigrees and genealogies” (Smith 12). According to Tripathi, Lord Manu dictated the lives of the major emperors in India—the Suryavanshis and Chandravanshis, who are depicted as parts of this civilisation. However, the depiction of Manu as the establisher of the Indus Valley civilisation is anachronistic for *Manusmriti* (the dictations of Manu) is dated back to the first century AD (Bayly 14) whereas, the civilisation was established much before 12th BC. According to Indian mythology, the name Manu refers to the first human being as well as the fourteen Kshatriya rulers. “In the *Satapatha Brahmanan* Manu was known as the first human, father of the race, first to kindle the sacrificial fire, and creator of the social order” (Williams 210). Later *Puranas* use the term Manu to mention the fourteen rulers belonging to different time periods called “manvantaras.” The novel does not mention the existence of several rulers known as Manu, but it refers to a single person. Tripathi has borrowed the myth of Vaivasvata, the seventh Manu, for his novel and portrays him as the establisher of the Vedic Civilisation. The story of Vaivasvata is similar to that of Noah who escaped the great flood with the help of the Matsya (fish) avatar of Vishnu (Mani 484).

Following the story of Satyavrata, Tripathi presents Lord Manu as a king from South India. “... Lord Manu lived more than eight and a half thousand years ago. He was apparently a prince from south India. A land way beyond the Narmada

River, where the earth ends and the great ocean begins. That land is the Sangamtamil” (Tripathi, *Meluha* 184). Establishing an association with Lord Manu and Sangamtamil, Tripathi hints that Lord Manu was a Dravidian king who was forced to leave his land to escape from the flood which was caused by the rising of the sea. Later he set up a new, well-organised, civilisation in north India and became a priest in his later life. Hence, according to the novelist, Lord Manu, who had established the great civilisation along the rivers of Saraswati and Sindhu, was someone who had migrated from South India. Subsequently, the novelist subtly rejects the Aryan migration theory and celebrates the indigenesness of the people of the Indus Valley civilisation by positing that it was Lord Manu who had established the great Indus Valley civilisation which later flourished as the Vedic civilisation.

Aryan migration theory, which was first propounded during the colonial period, held that a race of Central Asian Aryans came to the subcontinent and replaced the indigenous Indus Valley civilisation (Thapar, *Penguin History* 13). They established the Vedic civilisation and from them originated Vedas and Hinduism. In contrast, proponents of ethno-religious nationalism reject this theory asserting that Aryans were the original inhabitants who established the Indus Valley civilisation on the banks of the Sindhu and Saraswati rivers and that was none other than the Vedic civilisation itself. They claim that Hindus of India are the direct descendants of these ancient Aryans. Romila Thapar analyses the obsession of ethno-religious ideologues on establishing Aryans as the original inhabitants of the land, viewing it as their effort to strengthen their own claim of superiority in the

nation as the true successors of the original inhabitants. She observes that “if the Hindus are to have primacy as citizens in a Hindu Rashtra (kingdom), their foundational religion cannot be an imported one” (qtd. in R. Jain and Lasseter). Nevertheless, Shoaib Daniyal, in the article “Two New Genetic Studies Upheld Indo-Aryan Migration. So Why Did Indian Media Report the Opposite?” and Tony Joseph in “How Genetics is Settling the Aryan Migration Debate” contend that recent genetic studies debunk the assertions that Aryans are the authentic indigenous people of the region. Yet, ethnoreligious nationalists, rejecting existing evidence contrary to their arguments, do believe their claims as the truth and continue to propagate the Aryan migration theory as a myth. Depicting Meluha with similarities to the Indus Valley civilisation, Amish Tripathi aligns with prevailing post-truth narratives in the nation, asserting that Aryans established the great civilisation.

Ashwin Sanghi in *Krishna Key* also rejects the Aryan migration theory and presents it as a Western conspiracy to undermine the superiority of the people of India and their religion. The novel gives significance to the argument that the first civilisation in the world was the Saraswati civilisation which was established along the banks of the mythical Saraswati River, before the establishment of settlements along the Sindhu River. According to Ravi Mohan Saini, the protagonist of *Krishna Key*, Vedas, the epics, Upanishads and the Puranas were produced during the Saraswati civilisation which he considers the earliest civilisation in the world. He blames the foreign historians for creating doubt regarding the authenticity of Saraswati civilisation and its link with Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas. Saini argues that according to Western historians, Saraswati civilisation has no body of literature

of their own and on the other hand the body of literature including Vedas does not have a corresponding civilisation. In Saini's view, Western historians do not link Vedas with Saraswati civilisation for it may contradict their Aryan migration theory. He states:

The discovery of the dried bed of the ancient Sarasvati is the strongest evidence to link the *Vedas* to Harappan culture. The *swastika* – a sacred symbol in the *Vedas* – has been found at innumerable places in Indus Valley sites. Archaeologists have also discovered fire altars, images of people in meditation, and sacred water tanks – all indications of the fact that the ones who built these magnificent cities were the same people who wrote the *Vedas*. (Sanghi 194)

Saini refutes the theory that Vedas could have possibly written after the decline of the Indus Valley civilisation by referring to the course and existence of the Saraswati River. The Saraswati River is mentioned as the largest river in the region in the *Rig Veda* whereas in *Mahabharata* it appears as a river that was no longer mighty. Thus, Saini assumes that Vedas were written when the river was in full flow.

Anil Varshney believes that it is time “to start rewriting ... history texts.” He denounces the Aryan migration theory and maintains that once Saraswati was a mighty river that had dried up due to tectonic movements of the Indian subcontinent. Varshney opines that the Indus civilisation should be renamed Saraswati civilisation for most of the sites of habitation were actually along the Saraswati River. He maintains that remote earth-sensing satellite pictures have proved that “[m]ore than five thousand years ago, a mighty river—commonly referred to in Vedas as the

Sarasvati—flowed through this arid desert” of Rajasthan (29). He also believes that *Mahabharata* is a historical record and that Krishna was a historical figure.

For years we’ve been fed the notion that Krishna was merely a mythological figure, a product of our collective imagination down the ages. We’ve also been told that Sarasvati sites predated the age of the Mahabharata by several thousand years. ... The Sarasvati civilisation was not a pre-Vedic settlement. It was the greatest Vedic community on earth and it was the inhabitants of this great development who wrote the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*. (34)

Varshney points out the presence of fire altars in Kalibangan and the Great Bath in Mohenjodaro as evidence to consider these sites as part of Vedic civilisation.

In a similar vein, most of the characters in *Krishna Key* emphasise that the Aryan migration theory is a Western conspiracy which overlooks the genius of the true inhabitants of the land, the Aryans. Mataji aka Priya also rejects the Aryan migration theory as just a fabricated story or myth by the English men for “there is no record of an invasion or migration in the Vedas, Puranas or Ithihas” (180). Since the event is not recorded in these texts, she posits that it is implausible that it occurred. She considers the Western scholars “pseudo-scholars” and accuses them of being “unwilling to accept the fact that ours was an amazingly advanced civilisation that lay distinctly outside Europe, at a time far earlier than the one which the patriarchs Abraham and Moses made their covenant with God!” (180). She claims that what is taught in the schools as history about the Aryan migration is not history or science but stories “based on Christian belief” system.

Instead of the Aryan migration theory, Mataji suggests that it was the indigenous Vedic people, who are none other than Aryans, moved westward from India. She asserts that the Mesopotamian civilisation was founded by people who migrated from India due to the drying up of the Saraswati River. Saini also holds this view and states:

When Saraswati dried up, it resulted in the great river civilization decaying. The inhabitants were forced to move away towards new sources of water—either east towards the Ganges basin or west towards the Indus basin or even further towards the Tigris-Euphrates valley. (168)

Hence, Saini and Mataji, refuting the existing historical narratives, propose an alternative narrative.

Though the theory of Aryans as natives of India is falsified (Shinde et al., 2019; Narasimhan et al., 2019), it is still propagated on a large scale in the post-truth political context, just as it is done in *Krishna Key*. However, observing the attempts to debunk the Aryan migration theory as an ideologically motivated one, Meera Nanda states:

If evidence can be produced to show that the Indus Valley civilisation was Vedic, it can be established that it was the original homeland of the Aryan people that composed the Vedas and ‘brought civilisation to the rest of the world,’ ... If the Indus Valley civilisation that flourished between 3000 BC to about 1900 BC can be shown to be Vedic, then the dates of the composition of the Vedas can be pushed back by a few millennia from the

currently accepted date of 1500 BC. Above all, if the Indus Valley civilisation can be proved to be Vedic, then the Hindu descendants of the Vedic/Aryan people can be shown to be the true sons of the soil. (“Big Lies”)

Historians assert that before the Aryan migration to the Indian subcontinent, a civilisation had already been established along the Indus Valley by the indigenous people; subsequently, the Aryans migrated and founded the Vedic civilisation. According to Romila Thapar, “[i]n the 1920s archaeology revealed the existence of an urban civilization, dating to a period prior to the *Rig-Veda*, in the north-west of India: the Indus civilization or the Harappa culture” (*Penguin History* 105). By emphasising Indus civilisation was established before *Rig-Veda*, the first Veda, Thapar distinguishes both civilisations. She claims that regardless of the “desperate attempts” to prove that “the Vedic people and the Harappans were identical,” “[r]eading the Harappan pictograms as Indo-Aryan has failed” (Thapar, *The Past as Present* 82).

Irfan Habib also maintains that the Indus civilisation was not the same as the Vedic civilisation. Refuting the claim that both civilisations are the same by pointing out the presence of fire altars in Kalibangan, he remarks that “even if the excavators are right in interpreting the structures” of fire altars, “it is obvious that” they “were only local phenomena: no similar features were at all found in the principal Indus cities, Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, and all the numerous other excavated sites.” Besides,

At Lothal, the alleged ‘fire altars’ were set up on the acropolis after it had been abandoned following the main Indus phase, leading the excavator to

concede that the ‘altars’ did not belong to the ‘official’ Indus cult. It is also not clear how many of these ‘altars’ in individual houses and outside of them can also equally be interpreted as ovens of some sort or another. In any case, they hardly make a substantial case for any Vedic affiliations of the Indus religion, since a naturalistic religion like that of the Indus civilization could have on its own generated a cult of fire (the burner of forest and scrub, trapper of wild animals within its spreading flames, the giver of soft food). (Habib 72).

While historians consider Vedic civilisation as a continuation of Indus civilisation, following the migration of Aryans, major characters in *Krishna Key* maintain that the civilisations are one and the same and no migration has happened to India.

According to Saini, what the world perceives as the Indus Valley civilisation is in fact, Vedic civilisation which could be “correctly” called Saraswati civilisation. As he postulates, all constructions including the Great Bath and fire altars found in the Indus-Saraswati sites were built with bricks of uniform dimension which follow the ratio of 1:2:3. Hence, in his opinion, if the Indus-Saraswati civilisation was not the Vedic civilisation, they would not have followed that particular ratio for it is related to the sacred number 108.

We know the tremendous mystical importance that the Vedic seers attached to the number 108 ... But 108 is derived from the multiplication of an ancient sequence. The sequence is $1^1 \times 2^2 \times 3^3$. Why were the Indus Valley residents using bricks in the ratio 1:2:3 if they were not Vedic? (Sanghi 287)

Though historians differentiate between the early Indus civilisation and the later Vedic civilisation, Saini tries to establish Vedic civilisation as the Indus civilisation and disregards the Aryan migration theory.

Historians maintain that the inception of the Indus Valley civilisation predates the existence of the Vedas. While the civilisation endured from 3300 BCE to 1300 BCE,

The standard chronology of what is called the Vedic period is taken to be from roughly 1500 to 500 BCE. This is the period of the composition of the first Veda, the Rig Veda, and then the later ones, the Samaveda, Yajurveda and finally the Atharvaveda. (Thapar, *Which of Us Are Aryans* x-xi)

It is posited that the *Rig Veda* is often dated to a period post the decline of urbanism, approximately around 1500 BCE or a couple of centuries later (Thapar, *Which of Us Are Aryans* 32; Habib 73). The subsequent Vedas, including the *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, are linked to the Ganga plain and are proposed to have originated in the early first millennium BCE (Thapar, *Which of Us Are Aryans* 32). Romila Thapar's claims refute Saini's observation that historians do not associate Vedas with any civilisations. In fact, when Vedas are recognised as the products of later Indus Valley civilisation, the claim regarding Aryans as the founders of the civilisation collapses. Thapar identifies the attempts to associate the *Rigveda* with the early Indus Valley civilisation and label it as the Saraswati civilisation are motivated by a desire to establish the significance of Vedic culture, despite lacking substantial evidence (*The Penguin History* 109). She points out that the lack of substantiated evidence for the two propositions—the presence of Harappan cultural

artefacts and monuments in the *Rig-Veda*, and the correspondence of concepts organising the Harappan urban settlements in the *Rig-Veda*—prevents the identification of the Indus Valley civilisation as the Saraswati civilisation (109-10). Irfan Habib also interprets efforts to associate the civilisation with the Saraswati River as an endeavour to “arbitrarily impose a Vedic complexion on the culture” (13). However, contrary to the established linguistic and archaeological evidence, alternative narratives persist positing the antiquity of the Vedas to the Harappan civilisation. Though these alter-narratives, like those present in *Krishna Key*, do not have any valid evidence, they advocate for the reclassification of the Indus Valley civilisation as the Saraswati civilisation as well as the identification of the Aryan migration theory as a myth.

Anand Neelakantan, in contrast to Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, postulates that a kind of migration has happened in the history of the Indus Valley civilisation. Recounting the history of the Asura people, Ravana states:

... somewhere, perhaps 2000 years ago, they settled down in cities and towns along the river banks. ... what an empire they built! It sprawled from the Indus in the west to Brahmaputra in the east, and from the Himalayas in the north to the Narmada in the south. ... It might have been about a 1000 years ago, when the horse-mounted, savage tribes of central Jambu Dweepa plundered the Asura cities in the great plains. ... A civilization was destroyed and the clock of progress was set back by centuries. (Neelakantan 26)

Asura maintains that as a result of the invasion of foreign tribes from the central Jambu Dweepa under the leadership of Indra, Asuras had to leave their well-built

cities and move toward the southern parts of the Indian subcontinent. The downfall of the Asura empire and the rise of the Deva civilisation could be read in parallel to the emergence of the Vedic civilisation following the decline of the Indus civilisation.

According to ancient Indian cosmogony, Jambu Dweepa/ Jambu-dvipa refers to one of the islands and “within this, in the area to the south of the Himalaya, was *Bharatvarsha*,” or the land of Bharata (Thapar, *Penguin History* 38-39).

The sub-continent of India, stretching from the Himalayas to the sea, is known to the Hindus as *Bharata-Varsha* or the land of Bharata, a king famous in Puranic tradition. It was said to form part of a larger unit called *Jambu-dvipa* which was considered to be the innermost of seven concentric island-continent into which the earth, as conceived by Hindu cosmographers, was supposed to have been divided. ... early Buddhist evidence suggests that *Jambu-dvipa* was a territorial designation actually in use from the third century B.C. at the latest, and was applied to that part of Asia, outside China ... (Majumdar et al. 4)

Following the ancient Indian cosmogony, Anand Neelakantan portrays Jambu Dweepa as the native place of Devas from where they came to the Indus Valley.

The invasion of the Devas in the novel resembles the history of the Aryan migration to India. Neelakantan emphasises that the tribes who invaded the ancient Indus Valley civilisation arrived “horse-mounted” (Neelakantan 26). The Indus civilisation was unfamiliar with horses whereas the Vedic civilisation gives

“considerable functional and ritual importance to the horse” (Thapar, *Past as Present* 195). Devdutt Pattanaik also emphasises the significance of horses in studying Indian history and states: “... historians believe that the Aryas brought horses to India and that in a ceremony known as Ashwamedha, they let loose their most magnificent horse and laid claim to all the lands the horse traversed unchallenged. Stories such as [“Yudhistira’s horse sacrifice”] ... endorse this idea” (165).

Hence, by portraying the “horse-mounted” conquerors as the Devas, Anand Neelakantan establishes a connection between the native Indus civilisation with the Asuras and the later Vedic civilisation with the Devas. The conflict between Devas and Asuras in the novel could be read as a representation of the historical conflict between Aryans and Dravidians. According to Aswathy S Nair, “Anand Neelakantan’s new version of *Ramayana* is not a story of Gods, but of human beings who exist in the brutal caste consciousness where the Aryans with their fair skin and their own notions of superiority dominate the Dravidians” (13). According to the novel, as the Devas conquered the land, the native Asuras had to move away.

Magnificent cities crumbled. A civilisation was destroyed and the clock of progress was set back by centuries. The Asuras lost everything and they fled to the south. The Nagas withdrew to the eastern hills and the Kinnara and Yaksha kingdoms were wiped out. The Gandharvas became a wandering tribe and soon got lost in the bylanes of history and mythology. (Neelakantan 26)

While mocking Brahmins and their practices, Ravana states that Brahmins might have come from a “cold place,” for they appeal to the gods by putting twigs into the fire. By mentioning a far-away “cold place” from where they could have come from, Ravana underscores that Brahmins are not the native people of the land but are migrants. Thus, Neelakantan deviates from the post-truth narratives that claim Aryan migration is Western propaganda aimed at defaming Indian superiority, and that the Indus civilisation is the same as the Vedic civilisation.

However, Romila Thapar maintains that the Aryan migration cannot be counted as an “invasion” which resulted in the destruction of the Indus civilisation. She argues:

The evidence suggests that the speakers of Aryan languages—whoever they were—migrated into India from the borderlands. The migrations are likely to have been slow and small-scale. ... The decline of cities is no longer attributed to a single cause, since their decline was not simultaneous, ... The more likely causes that are under investigation are ecological and environmental—massive flooding at Mohenjo-daro, changing river courses of the Hakra and the Sutlej, deforestation due to agriculture and brick-making resulting in desiccation and a decline in agricultural production on which the cities were dependent, de-urbanization due to a decline in commerce, and possibly some climate change. (*Past as Present* 195)

Yet, Anand Neelakantan portrays the migration of Devas as an invasion which resulted in the destruction of the Asura race and their civilisation.

Characters in *Krishna Key*, especially Mataji, uphold ethno-religious nationalist ideology. They believe in the superiority of ancient Indians and their culture. Mataji showcases an intense affinity towards her nation and its ‘superior’ history as she perceives it. She sows the seeds of nationalist and ethnocentric pride in the mind of young Taarak by emphasising on the ancient glories of the Vedic age as per her beliefs. She manipulates him to believe that it is his responsibility “to right” the “historical wrongs” being the final *avatar*¹ (incarnation) of Lord Vishnu–Kalki. According to her convictions, Vedas, Puranas and epics are historical records that uphold the supremacy of ancient Indian people. She views the Vedic civilisation as the real cradle of civilisation, discrediting Mesopotamia as claimed by Western scholars. According to her, “history is simply a version of events that can be easily influenced by the political, cultural and religious leanings of those who write it” (Sanghi 242).

Believing what she believes is the right version, she takes it as her responsibility to ‘correct’ history. Although she acknowledges the likelihood of multiple interpretations of history, she remains unwilling to entertain the possibility that her own version might be flawed. This refusal to question the accuracy of her viewpoint hinders an objective understanding of history. She claims she wants “the historical authenticity of Krishna to be firmly established. Krishna should not be taught as mythology, but as history!” (242) However, in her attempt to prove the historicity of Krishna, she often undermines rationality. She upholds the belief that “what has been passed on ... as historical research” regarding the history of India

¹ A concept in Hinduism which signifies physical manifestation of a deity or god on earth.

was Western propaganda by “pseudo scholars” who were unwilling to accept the superiority of ancient Indians (180). She emphasises that the Aryan invasion was a fabricated episode in Indian history and states: “The English ... came to India and propagated the myth of an Aryan invasion” (180). Mataji is dominated by confirmation bias and she accepts only those claims which align with her preconceived notions. What she presents as truth is her subjective opinions. However, Gopal in the Shiva Trilogy identifies the futility of establishing who were the first civilised people in the world. He believes that Indians were the first civilisation in the world, but he also recognises that the people in Mesopotamia believe human civilisation began in their land. When Shiva asks him which claim is true, he replies: “I don’t know. This goes back many thousands of years. But frankly, does it matter who got civilised first so long as all of us eventually became civilised?” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 361). Gopal, unlike Mataji, does not believe that he needs to prove the superiority of his race by establishing it as the founding unit of everything.

People often, attempt to present a particular group as superior, to which they belong. In an attempt to proclaim the superiority of the ancient Indians and Hinduism, Mataji tries to establish Hinduism as the first originated religion in the world. She positions herself as a descendant of the great ancient Indian civilisation and tries to glorify it as the superior one compared to all other cultures. She contends that even Islam has its roots in Hinduism because the successors of the Saraswati civilisation were the people inhabiting the region where Islam emerged. She states

that Kaaba was a pagan temple before the coming of Islam and one of the chief deities worshipped there was the moon god Hubal who resembles Shiv.

Just like Shiv, Hubal was depicted as carrying the moon on his head. And just like Shiv, from whose holy abode the Ganga flowed down to us, Hubal had the sacred waters of Zamzam, ... The Muslims retained many of the pagan rites associated with the Kaaba. They continued to circumambulate the Kaaba seven times – just like Hindus do around fire. ... They even retained the symbol of Hubal – the crescent and star – and adopted it as an Islamic symbol! (Sanghi 182)

Mataji asserts that Hindu beliefs are universal. Accentuating the importance of the sound “om,” she asserts that it is used not only by Hindus but also even in the English language. She finds words like omnipotent, omniscience, omnivorous, and omen begin with the sacred om and these words are sufficient to mark the significance of om. “Om is an expression of divinity and authority and that’s the reason why Aum is to be found even in the Christian Amen and Islamic Amin” (162), says Mataji.

Like Mataji, Saini also traces the root of almost every religion to Vedic civilisation due to his confirmation bias regarding the superiority of ancient Indians. According to him, the word Allah had originated from the Ilah, a goddess worshipped in the Vedic times. “The existence of the word Allah prior to Islam is evident from the fact that the prophet Mohammed’s own father had the name *Abd-Allah*—what is today commonly pronounced *Abdullah*,” opines Saini (292). He claims that Noah’s Ark was built in India and the story of the great flood mentioned

in the Bible was a historical event that took place in India. He posits that the story of Noah is almost identical to the Sumerian legend of Gilgamesh, the king of Uruk (modern-day Iraq) and it is in fact a retelling of the destruction of Dwaraka.

Just take the name Noah and flip the two vowels in the middle. What do you get? *Naoh* – the Hindi word for boat! Even the very concept of man’s creation is from India. The English word *man* is derived from the Sanskrit root *manus* – which is also the root of the Indian name *Manu*, the mythological progenitor of the Hindus. (228)

Taking the Biblical story of Noah literally, Saini tries to prove that such a huge boat having a length of three hundred cubits, breadth of fifty cubits and height of thirty cubits as it is mentioned in the Bible, could have been built only at Lothal. “It was the only shipyard that was capable of producing a ship of that magnitude in ancient times ... the other possibility was Dholavira. Both Lothal and Dholavira were extremely close to Dwaraka ...,” remarks Saini (228). Though Saini presents his opinion as the truth, he is not able to produce any valid evidence in favour of him.

An attempt to portray India as the centre of the world is also discernible in *Krishan Key*. Saini comments that Mount Kailash was considered the centre of the world by the Vedic sages.

As per mythology, the four faces [of Mount Kailash] were made of crystal, ruby, gold, and lapis lazuli. In Vedic times, it would have been considered the pillar of the world! Twenty-two thousand feet high, Mount Kailash lies at the heart of the world’s mandala and is nestled within six mountain ranges

that symbolise a lotus. The four rivers originating from Kailash supposedly flow down to the four quarters of the world and divide the world into four regions. (223)

According to Saini, the sacredness of Mount Kailash transcends Hinduism. He claims that the Garden of Eden mentioned in the Bible was in fact Mount Kailash itself. The verse in the Book of Genesis that states “Now a river flowed out of Eden to water the garden; and from there it divided and became four rivers” is taken by Saini to validate his argument. He also points out that apart from Hinduism other religions including Bon Buddhism and Jainism consider Mount Kailash holy. Hence, he suggests, there is no reason to discredit the supremacy of Mount Kailash. However, he does not emphasise that while rich in symbolic value, the description of Mount Kailash does not align with geological and geographical realities.

In *Krishna Key*, the major characters, particularly Mataji and Saini, hold a strong belief in the superiority of the ancient Hindu way of life. As a result, they consider anything outside of Hinduism the Other. Similar to the prominent post-truth narratives in the nation regarding the “historic cruelty” of Mughal rule (Jaffrelot 52), the propensity to devalue Mughal contributions to India is evident in *Krishna Key*. Saini attempts to prove the Taj Mahal as a temple of Indian origin rather than an ‘Islamic structure’ built by the Mughals. The portrayal of the Taj Mahal as a Shiva temple in the novel can be interpreted as part of efforts to erase Muslim contributions from the nation’s history. Saini observes so many symbols on the Taj Mahal which he categorises as non-Islamic. According to him, the central dome of the Taj Mahal does not bear the usual Islamic symbol of a crescent with a star but

instead of the star, there is a water pot containing bent mango leaves with the leaves supporting a coconut. He also points out that the Taj Mahal does not have a square layout as it seems. Taj Mahal, in fact, has eight faces being an octagon and Saini considers the fact very significant because eight is a sacred number according to Hinduism since it represents four cardinal and four ordinal directions. He feels it odd that the Taj Mahal, (if) an Islamic structure, is made as an octagon. He notices that the enclosure that holds the cenotaphs of Mumtaz Mahal and Shah Jahan is also placed in an octagon. On the top of the main dome, Saini notices an inverted lotus flower which he considers another Hindu symbol. On the main entrance arch also, Saini notices the presence of the symbol of a red lotus. He also finds six-pointed stars, which represent the union of Shiv and Shakti, in the tiling pattern of the gardens. Saini indicates that some secret is buried in the underground chambers of the Taj Mahal. Making a reference to *Badshnaama*, the official history of Shahjahan written by Mullah Abdul Hamid Lahori, Saini claims that the Taj Mahal was built at a spot where a Hindu palace, of the family of Raja Man Singh, stood before. Thus, he concludes, the Taj Mahal stands at a place where a temple was present in the past for every palace would have had a temple. Saini adds that the palace was once called Tejo Mahalay, the Great abode of Tej (Shiv) (Sanghi 426-432). By reinterpreting the Taj Mahal as a Shiva temple, the narrative not only revises history but also fosters a sense of alienation and marginalisation of Mughal heritage, exemplifying the Othering process.

Sanghi, using his character Saini, puts forth a conspiracy theory that is prevalent in the contemporary context, regarding the Taj Mahal and the existence of

“closed secret rooms” in the building. In alignment with Saini’s viewpoint, “Over the years, several ... [political] leaders have repeated and amplified unhistorical claims that the Taj is in fact a Hindu temple that was built much before the reign of Shah Jahan” (Malhotra). The monument, according to known popular history, was built on the instructions of Shahjahan, the Mughal emperor, in 1653. However, P N Oak claims that the Taj was built in the 4th century as a Hindu palace (8). He adds: “Students and scholars of architecture should ... look upon and study the Tejo Maha Alaya, alias Taj Mahal, as a ‘flower’ of ancient Hindu temple art and not of Muslim sepulchral workmanship” (Oak 206). However, as the *Hindustan Times* reports in “Taj Mahal is a Tomb and Not a Temple, ASI Tells Court,” the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) had disproven Oak’s claim and reasserted that Taj Mahal is indeed a tomb built by Shahjahan. In May 2022, as Divya A reports in “ASI Had Released Photos of Taj Mahal’s Underground Cells Ahead of Court Order,” the ASI released some photographs of the closed rooms inside the Taj Mahal, dispelling claims of them holding secrets that would prove the monument was once a temple. Sanghi adopts Oak’s claim and presents it as Saini’s observations in *Krishna Key*.

While *Krishna Key* celebrates the ethnic and religious identity of ancient Indians, *Asura* explores the dynamics of ethnocentrism. Anand Neelakantan does not portray ancient Indians as a monolithic racial unit. Instead, he tries to acknowledge the existence of various racial groups and presents Asuras, Devas and Vanaras as three prevalent racial units during Ravana’s period. Depicting Devas, Asuras, and Vanaras from the Asuras’ perspective, Neelakantan illustrates the workings of ethnocentrism and suggests that each racial unit believes in their own

cultural superiority and looks down on others as uncivilised. Both the narrators in the novel, Ravana and Bhadra, are well aware that people tend to believe in their own racial and ethnic superiority. Every group “nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders” (Sumner 17-18). During Ravana’s conquest of other kingdoms, Bhadra notices that the Asura army is no less cruel than the Deva army that had once destroyed his family and village. Bhadra finds peace in the thought that their actions of cruelty could be justified because Devas deserved to be hated.

... it gave us great pleasure to slay the men and take the women. Sometimes I felt we were no different from the rampaging Deva army which had trampled my village. But then, peer pressure is something which even great men find hard to resist. It was easier to succumb to temptation than raise oneself to the chivalrous act usually heard about only in legends and fairy tales. After all, they were just Devas and deserved to be hated, irrespective of their social standing. (Neelakantan 211)

Bhadra comments on the influence of peer pressure, highlighting how the desire for social conformity leads people to mimic the decisions of those around them. For him, Devas represent “the Other” who had destroyed and overpowered the Asura civilisation to which he belonged. Thus, in Bhadra’s perspective, Asuras constitute the “people” whereas Devas symbolise the “elite.”

Since the narrative of *Asura* follows the perspective of Asuras, we get an entirely different picture of Devas from the epics and other myths. According to Vettam Mani, Devas are “Gods” or “deities” (207) whereas Asuras “belong to the

demonic dynasty” (67). However, *Asura* challenges this common perception by offering an alternative narrative. Accommodating dual narrative in his novel, Neelakantan directs attention towards the potential for multiple and alter-narratives. Keeping the changing nature of narratives according to the narrator in mind, Asura combines two different perspectives of the Asura clan: the perspective of Ravana, the Asura King and the perspective of Bhadra, an Asura who was a common man turned soldier. Subsequently, the novel offers two different, often contradictory, perspectives within the Asura community. “The novel *Asura* has a well-knit dual narrative . . . with the help of reversing the traditional story of Rama and traditional image of Ravana as an antagonist and a devil,” observe Pushpendra Singh Rathore and Divya Joshi (74). The unnamed washer-man in *Ramayana*, whose words led to the abandoning of Sita by Ram, thus, achieves a significant role and he is equipped with a strong voice in Neelakantan’s novel. Neelakantan gives him a name—Bhadra—and makes him a constant presence in Ravana’s life.

Bhadra, telling his life story to Mala, realises that narratives get exaggerated or slightly modified according to the interests of the narrator.

As I [Bhadra] spoke, my childhood became picture perfect, my village became heaven, the Devas who had attacked it became the worst kind of devils. My adventures became bolder, my role with Mahabali’s army important, my position with Ravana high, my culinary skills perfect. And my torment under Vikarma unbearable. I exaggerated and she realized I was exaggerating, adding frills to the humble life of a common farmer.

(Neelakantan 112)

Through Bhadra's words, the novelist proposes that antagonists become protagonists and vice versa as the perspective of the narration changes. In fact, that is exactly how Ravana becomes the protagonist in the novel unlike in the epic. *Asura* showcases that stories undergo transformations and take various perspectives according to the narrator and their affiliations.

Just as Devas consider Asuras uncivilised and barbaric, Ravana, an Asura himself, calls Devas semi-civilised and nomadic. Devas are presented in the novel as "savage tribes" from central Jambu Dweepa who conquered the Asura cities under the leadership of Indra. "Epithets of contempt and abomination" (Sumner 18) such as "semi-civilised," "weak," "uncultured" and "savage tribes" are used in the novel when the characters talk about other ethnic communities. Ravana is aware of his ethnic consciousness and thus, he adds that he might be prejudiced towards Devas for he belongs to an entirely different culture. Recounting the heydays of Asura civilisation, Ravana assumes that "the supremacy of the Asura race could have been highly exaggerated" since a "defeated race often uses its cultural supremacy to cover the shame of defeat" and the "victorious party was always portrayed as barbarians who defeated and destroyed a highly-cultured and well-developed civilization through deceit and sorcery" (Neelakantan 26). As William Graham Sumner puts it, "ethnocentrism leads a people to exaggerate and intensify everything" (18) and this is evident in Ravana and Bhadra's assessment of Devas, an ethnic group to which they do not belong.

According to Ravana and Bhadra, Asuras are a group of civilised people who were attacked by the Deva invaders. The *Puranic Encyclopaedia* describes

Amaravathi as the city of Indra, king of Devas (Mani 326). However, in *Asura*, it is a city built by Asuras and later conquered by Indra. In Ravana's words, Amaravathi, the Deva capital city, "once a huge city at the mouth of the Saraswati river, was now a miserable old shanty town" (Neelakantan 27). Ravana suggests that once a great city, established and ruled by Asuras, Amaravathi was ruined under the rule of Devas. Indian mythology presents Deva folk as the epitome of kindness and virtue whereas Asuras are presented just the opposite way. Conversely, Bhadra's narration of how the Deva army had looted and killed the common Asura folk of Mahabali's empire showcases that during wartime, everyone whether it is Deva or Asura behaves heartlessly without any compassion for fellow beings. Ravana opines that Indra performed his duties as a conqueror beautifully by destroying everything that existed before his invasion and got the name *Purendra* or 'slayer of cities.' "He burned libraries, butchered poets and architects, pummelled the temples and hacked women and children" (Neelakantan 62). Devas try to teach Asuras the Deva decorum of life and they consider it their duty to civilise the Asura people. Ravana puts it as "Deva's burden to civilize us" (77) mirroring Rudyard Kipling's phrase "the White man's burden" which praises colonialism as a "moral duty" of the White people to civilise, educate and "to bring the backward races to maturity" (Drabble 808).

Whereas Devas look down on Asuras as uncouth barbarians, Asuras think of themselves as a developed and civilised society. The narrative of Bhadra shows that the common Asura folk consider Devas as uncivilised Barbarians. Asuras denounce most of the customs followed by Devas as irrational and unacceptable. They

consider casteism as a social evil and fail to understand why people are segregated in terms of their birth into different social groups. Ravana counts casteism as the major social issue found among Devas. For Ravana, it is incomprehensible why people are scrupulous about not touching each other whereas they do not hesitate to defecate in public. He notices that the natives of Ayodhya were more afraid of being touched by the Asuras than of being killed when the Asura army entered their city (Neelakantan 217).

Asura views casteism as a social practice imposed upon the indigenous people by the invaded Devas. Considering Christopher Bartley's statement that "Aryan migrations into the north-west of the subcontinent introduced the Vedic religious culture and the fourfold natural hierarchy of varnas (Brahmins, warriors, farmers and servants)" during "the second millennium B.C.," (2) it could be asserted that the invasion of Devas mentioned by Anand Neelakantan parallels the historical migration of Aryans to the Indian subcontinent. According to Ravana, casteism is a darkness which splits people "not by language or race or affluence, but by the subjective view of a set of Brahmins who decided what was pure and impure" (Neelakantan 218). As it is observed by Bhadra and Ravana, casteism divided the people into millions of sections and some people began to enjoy power over others only because of their caste. The society began to treat some people heavenly and some others contemptuously: "some were pure and others not – not because of their deeds or their minds, but because of their birth" (352).

According to Ravana, Deva's attitude towards women is also terrible like the caste system. He wonders why women folk do not participate much in public affairs

in the Deva kingdoms and why they are veiled in the public. In Ayodhya, Ravana noticed that:

There were fewer women than men on the streets. And they were veiled and did not look the men in the eye. They walked with their eyes fixed on their dusty feet. I had never seen such submissive women in my life. This was a different culture, an exotic civilization which was centuries behind anything I had seen in my kingdoms of the Asura, Vanara, Yaksha or Nagas. (217)

Ravana also finds fault with the *swayamvara* arranged for Sita.

These northern people had a strange custom. The father of the prospective bride would announce a contest among eligible suitors. I found it boorish. Was a bride a prize to be won in a contest? I had even heard of Deva men selling their wives as slaves, mortgaging them, or using them as wagers. It was terrible but what could one expect from a semi-civilized, nomadic tribe? Women were treated by the Deva men as nothing more than commodities. (296)

Ravana's concerns regarding the mistreatment of women by the Devas suggest that women among Asuras enjoyed the freedom of will and almost equal respect as men in society.

Neelakantan presents Vanara as another race of human beings, not as monkeys who speak and behave like humans. Vanara in the novel is the collective name of a race though the literal meaning of the term is monkey: they are portrayed as a mixed race having both Asura and Deva lineages. Being a mixed race, they

were bullied by both Asuras and Devas since mixed races were treated contemptuously in earlier times. Vanaras, unable to bear the social antipathy, withdrew to the forests of central India and led a life of their own.

They were weak and uncultured, even by Deva standards and chattered incessantly without doing any productive work. They led a crude and miserable existence collecting berries and honey from the forests, living in tree houses and caves and occasionally raiding nearby villages in search of gold and women. ... They were mostly ignored and often considered boors. In the Deva or Asura languages, the word *Vanara* was a curse word and to call someone a Vanara was the ultimate insult which resulted in duels and death. (Neelakantan 29)

Vanaras, in Neelakantan's narrative, resemble forest-dwelling communities that live separated from the civilised mainstream. Though Ravana follows a stereotypical view of them, they are not portrayed as inherently 'uncivilised' or 'barbaric,' rather their nature is somewhat justified showcasing their history of oppression and exclusion. He recounts that "[m]ixed races were held in contempt earlier. The Devas shunned them like lepers and they were laughed at by the Asuras" (28). The miserable lives of Vanaras changed and prospered when Bali appeared as their leader. Bali established himself as a dictator suppressing all the opposing voices and became a powerful entity and a prospective competitor even to the nearby Asura and Deva kingdoms. While Ravana deems other races inferior to his own, he acknowledges specific socio-political contexts for their perceived inferiority, refraining from attributing complete blame to the entire race. Thus, Neelakantan

offers a critical perspective on ethnocentrism, whereas, Sanghi glorifies the ethnoreligious superiority of the ancient Indians.

In the Shiva Trilogy, a dichotomy emerges between the Suryavanshis who live in Meluha and Chandravanshis who live in Swadeep, despite their shared ancestry. Both groups view the other as “the Other,” based on their national identity and culture, creating a sense of mutual distrust and animosity. Each faction perceives itself as distinct and superior to the other. While Suryavanshis place emphasis on rules and order, Chandravanshis focus on individual freedom and liberty. For Suryavanshis, laws are ultimate and they cannot be changed for anyone (Tripathi, *Meluha* 26). Nandi, a Suryavanshi himself, describes Chandravanshis as “crooked, untrustworthy and lazy people with no rules, morals or honour ... [they] are a blot on humanity!” (59) Daksha believes that by conquering Chandravanshis in a war, he can reform them. He considers it as his duty, just as the “White man’s burden.” Through a war, according to Daksha, he can

save them from evil philosophy that infects their soul. Save them from their treacherous rulers. Save them from their sorry, meaningless existence. And we can do this by giving them the benefits of the superior Suryavanshi way of life. Once they become like us, there will be no reason to fight. (117)

However, Swadeepans do not find any fault with their philosophies or way of life. They accept that their way of life is different from the Meluhans but they do not consider themselves to be saved. Initially, listening only to the Meluhan versions of Chandravanshis and their cruelty, as if in an echo-chamber, Shiva is persuaded to think that Chandravanshis represent evil and he decides to wage a war against them.

However, later, as he gets the chance to listen to the Chandravanshi version of the story, Shiva realises that Chandravanshis are not evil but simply different in their way of life.

The inhabitants of Meluha and Swadeep regard Nagas as a cursed community and treat them with trepidation and unease due to their physically disfigured attributes and the persisting superstitious convictions associated with them. Nagas are portrayed in the Shiva Trilogy as a distinct group of people whose physical characteristics set them apart, giving them an appearance that is perceived as ‘unnatural.’ The nation India, as the novel presents, encompasses the large area that lies between the Himalayas and the Narmada River, excluding South India. Nagas, who are ostracised from mainstream society, are compelled to live south of the Narmada River. According to Nandi, Nagas are:

... born with hideous deformities because of the sins of their previous births. Deformities like extra hands or horribly misshapen faces. But they have tremendous strength and skills. The Naga name alone strikes terror in citizen’s hearts. They are not even allowed to live in the Sapt Sindhu.
(Tripathi, *Meluha* 61)

Both Meluhans and Swadeepans hold biased views against Nagas since they are subscribed to the tales against Nagas. The perspective of the Nagas is disregarded and thus, they are perceived as evil beings and terrorists. They constitute the “Other” who is seen as the enemy of the people. Hence, Shiva and Parvateshwar find it intriguing to discover that a Naga has endangered his life to rescue a woman from a crocodile (193).

However, in the view of Nagas, they are the wronged ones who are ostracised from society. They resort to violence only to make sure that no child is born as a Naga. According to Maya, the Naga sister of King Athithigva, Nagas are the misunderstood beings. She states: “Call us a monster. Throw us to the South of the Narmada, where our presence will not trouble your lily white lives” (Tripathi, *Nagas* 168). She maintains that Nagas are not born devils but human beings with physiological deformities. Parashuram perceives Nagas as angels who helped him during his miserable days to fight against the injustices he faced. According to him, Nagas are “the best people Angels who fight for the oppressed. . . . They never kill innocents. They fight for justice, despite the injustices they endure” (251-52). As the perspective changes, the identity of Nagas also undergoes great transformation in the Shiva Trilogy and they are established as the wronged ones rather than the cursed people.

Amish Tripathi’s interpretation of the Nagas challenges conventional myths by presenting the Nagas not just as mythical beings with supernatural features but as real people with physical deformities. This reimagining brings a human dimension to the Nagas, suggesting that the myths surrounding them could have originated from real-life observations of marginalised groups in ancient Indian times. This could be read in parallel with Nagas as displaced aboriginal groups as a result of Aryan migration to central India. Pattanaik assumes that, historically, nagas were “serpent-worshipping agriculturists” who were “driven south by animal-herding Aryans.” “In time the identity of the fertility-bestowing serpents and the people who first worshipped them mingled and merged. The teacher of farming who worshipped

the naga became a naga himself' (164). By suggesting that the naga became an integral part of the identity of those who worshipped them, Pattanaik underscores the dynamic relationship between mythology and socio-economic practices in shaping the cultural and historical landscape.

The nationalistic discourse in twenty-first-century India, has a deep-rooted alliance with mythology. Taking the mythological past as the model for the future of the nation, the golden past is often equated with the concept of Ram Rajya (the rule of Ram). According to legends, governance was perfect during the reign of Lord Ram, the mythical hero of the epic *Ramayana*. However, Kancha Ilaiah observes that the ethno-religious nationalists “tend to be silent on exactly what aspect of Rama’s rule constitutes the ideal, and consequently, Rama Rajya is constructed as whatever rule the upper castes see fit” (xxiii).

Mythological accounts of Ram assert that he was a perfect human being; he was “an obedient son, an affectionate brother, a faithful husband, a truthful person, a straightforward man and a just ruler.” Consequently, his rule was regarded as an ideal one where “there existed brotherhood of man, no class differences, no sex distinctions, no poverty, no scarcity, no disease and all people were treated equal and lived happily without fear or jealousy” (Bazaz 18). Analysing the concept of Ram Rajya, Prem Nath Bazaz remarks:

Whether such a utopia ever existed in reality or was a figment of somebody’s imagination to delude millions living in wretchedness and squalor, famished and suppressed, may be considered as one of the unsolved mysteries of Indian history. (18)

However, the concept enjoyed much currency during the freedom movement and post-independence, largely due to Mahatma Gandhi's vision of transforming Indian society into a Ram Rajya. Nevertheless, Gandhi did not provide any clear definition for his concept of Ram Rajya and left it vague to be interpreted by others (Bazaz 19).

Though Gandhi highlighted a utopian version of the ideal state through the concept of Ram Rajya, the phrase intrinsically refers to the rule of a monarch, which “takes for granted the existence of unequal varnashrama (four-tier caste system) with multitudes of low, mean, stupid and untouchable human beings” (Bazaz 22). Ram was a king who inherited his country from his father and he followed the Brahmanical system of values. According to *Ramayana*, Ram's society was divided into several castes and lower castes were denied almost all amenities. Besides, Shambuka, a Shudra ascetic, was killed by Rama for the crime of learning Vedas and attempting to do *tapas*, a spiritual meditation practice, since he had violated the caste rules. The lower castes were not supposed to learn Vedas or perform religious rituals that were meant to be performed by Brahmins. Ram's society was predominantly patriarchal in nature and women were regarded as an inferior sect in society (23-27). Despite these concerns about the authenticity of Ram Rajya as an ideal governance model, discussions on this topic are marginalised in the post-truth era, and the advocacy for Ram Rajya remains a central tenet of ethnoreligious nationalism.

The exaltation of Ram and his governance is represented in some of the contemporary mythological fictions as well. The Shiva Trilogy presents Lord Ram as the great emperor who established the Meluhan way of life. According to Nandi,

[Ram] lived around one thousand two hundred years ago. He created our systems, our rules, our ideologies, everything. His reign is known simply as ‘*Ram Rajya*’ or ‘*the rule of Ram*’. The term ‘Ram Rajya’ is considered the gold standard in how an empire must be administered, in order to create a perfect life for all its citizens. (Tripathi, *Meluha* 35)

The notion of Ram Rajya is glorified in the novel just as it is celebrated in post-truth India. It is presented as the ideal world, the utopia, and the bygone golden era.

Since Amish Tripathi has already established a connection between his fictional Meluha with the Indus Valley civilisation, Ram, as the founder of Meluhan society, becomes intrinsically connected to one of the ancient world’s earliest civilisations. Meluha is portrayed as a nearly perfect society that strictly follows the rules and code of conduct formulated by Ram. Kali observes that his “reign, *Ram Rajya*, will always be celebrated across India as the perfect way to run an empire” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 12). When the rule of Ram is presented as the epitome of good governance, certain aspects of the same, revealed through the same myths, get wilfully neglected or deconstructed in the trilogy. Tripathi contends that even though Ram was an exceptional leader, all his deeds and decisions cannot be followed in a changed time since certain values change over time: good decisions taken by great men will not be good for a changed time and people, and thus revolutionary decisions of the ancient time could turn out to be invalid or erroneous for people of a

different time period. Thus, without rejecting the glory of Rama's rule, Tripathi tries to find a way to justify Ram's rule.

In the novel, Shiva identifies the Vikarma system, which was promoted by Ram, as unjustifiable in the modern times. According to the Vikarma system, people struck with diseases and misfortunes are treated as inferior and they have to lead a marginalised life away from the mainstream. The system was justified by associating it with the belief of 'karma' and it was believed that Vikarmas are punished for the sins they had done in their previous lives. Thus, they have the obligation to lead a life of suffering, ostracised from society. The Vikarma women "are not allowed to marry since they may contaminate others with their bad fate. They are not allowed to touch any person who is not related to them or is not part of their daily life" (Tripathi, *Meluha* 95). Shiva could not approve of the Vikarma system though he agrees Ram was a great leader and rule maker. However, Ram is not criticised for promoting such a discriminatory system, rather he is justified by suggesting that his decision was according to the need of those times. Justifying Ram's stand on the Vikarma system, the Pandit of Mohan Jo Daro states that the system helped to ensure order in society:

If you make a person believe that his misfortune in this birth is due to his sins in his previous birth, he will resign himself to this fate and not vent his fury on society at large. ... most of the time, the rebellions were not led by farsighted men who thought they would create a better way of life for the common man. They were led by men discontented with their lot in life. People who were a lot like the vikarma. These rebellions usually caused

chaos and decades were lost before order was restored. (Tripathi, *Meluha* 213-14)

Thus, though the system is condemned, the ruler who practised and promoted the system is justified. Ram is justified in implementing the caste system as well by suggesting that the caste system was implemented with good motives and was corrupted over time.

The caste system today is identified as a “degrading system of social organisation” which “deadens, paralyses, and cripples the people, from helpful activity” (Ambedkar 17.7). Caste is often identified as a social evil which enables a section of society to oppress and marginalise another section. According to Ambedkar, “the caste system is not merely a division of labour. It is also a division of labourers” and “it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other” (4.1). However, the caste system is depicted in the Shiva Trilogy as an enchanting system that gradually deviated into misuse over time.

Bhadra, an outsider in Meluha, recognises the caste system as a system of specialisation. He notices that in Meluha, all the intellectual professionals including doctors, lawyers, priests and teachers belong to the Brahmin community. Kshatriyas include warriors and rulers; Vaishyas are craftsmen, traders and business people; and the Shudras are farmers and workers. However, he fails to recognise that the “division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice. Individual sentiment, individual preference, has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination” (Ambedkar 4.4).

Praising Ram and the caste system, Parvateshwar maintains that during the period of Ram, caste was a fair method to categorise people based on merit. He states:

In Lord Ram's view, any society that conducted itself on any principle besides merit could not be stale. He believed that a person's caste should be determined *only by that person's karma*. Not his birth. Not his sex. No other consideration should interfere. (Tripathi, *Meluha* 98)

Parvateshwar argues that the caste system was not based on one's birth but on merit and capabilities. He adds that Ram had taken enough care to implement the system in an impartial manner. For the fair assignment of caste, Ram envisaged a city called Maika where all births were supposed to take place. After childbirth, the state takes control of the children up to a certain age and provides equal facilities and upbringing. Thereafter, the children choose their castes according to their ability and then they are adopted by parents of the same castes. However, the system was corrupted after a while, and the elite and influential people began to adopt their own children with the assistance of corrupt officials in Maika. Despite Parvateshwar's efforts to justify the caste system, his words reveal its inherent hierarchical nature, with the upper castes consistently wielding power to manipulate the system.

Though Nandi believes there is no reason for anyone to be unhappy with the caste system, Shiva does detect the power relation and hierarchical structuring of the society inherent in the caste system. The character of Nandi could be recognised as a docile and servile subject who is willing to serve the authority unquestioningly. Furthermore, he himself, not being at the lower strata of the caste system, remains

untouched by the harsh realities of the system. Consequently, he lacks the capacity to comprehend the hardships and marginalisation faced by those who suffer due to the class system and subsequently, he glorifies it. Furthermore, it could be inferred that he is led by social conformity for being a Meluhan himself. If he deviates from the prevailing majority opinion on the caste system, it may induce cognitive dissonance. So, he finds it convenient to consider the caste system as something good.

Explaining the nature of amulets everyone wears in Meluha, Nandi says that the amulet which represents one's caste shows various body parts of the Paramatma, the almighty. The head of the Paramatma is engraved on Brahmins' amulets, the shoulders of the Paramatma appear on Kshatriyas' amulets, the thighs of the Paramatma on Vaishyas' amulet and the feet of the Paramatma on the amulets of the Shudras. Even though the caste system was introduced to Shiva as a beneficiary system for the better working of society, he later identifies that the four castes are basically hierarchical in nature. Though the system seems fair enough according to Parvateshvar, Nandi and others, Shiva identifies that it has many drawbacks including the negligence of parents' affection and love for their children.

In a sense, Shiva can discern the flaws in the system precisely because he does not feel the need for social conformity since he does not belong to the Meluhan culture. However, Shiva too, does not emphasise the power dynamics and the consequent marginalisation and mistreatment ingrained in the caste system. Moreover, Shiva or any other characters do not condemn Ram, who is worshipped as an incarnation of god, for his decisions regarding the propagation of the caste

system. Rather they find justifications for his actions and believe that whatever Ram had done was according to the need of his time. Consequently, the social systems of India is glorified in the novel as a wonderful social order. Disregarding the lived experiences, Tripathi exalts the caste system as a specific feature of the golden past.

Krishna Key, at the very outset, is an attempt to portray *Mahabharata* as a historical text. While critics consider *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, two major sources of Indian mythology, as the literary genre of epics, that is “long verse narrative[s] on a serious subject, told in a formal and elevated style, and centered on a heroic or quasi-divine figure on whose actions depends the fate of a tribe, a nation, or ... the human race” (Abrams 76), Ashwin Sanghi presents *Mahabharata* as a historical document.

The protagonist of the novel, Ravi Mohan Saini, believes that the Mahabharata war was an actual historical event and that *Mahabharata*, the text, is a historical document of that particular war. A professor at St Stephen’s College, New Delhi, who teaches History of Mythology, Saini attempts to prove the historicity of the events portrayed in the epic. Saini references the research of B N Narhari Achar, a Professor at the University of Memphis, who attempted to determine the date of the Kurukshetra war. Achar proposes that the Mahabharata war occurred in 3067 BCE based on his research in astronomy. Saini, the fictional character of Ashwin Sanghi, also puts forth the same claim.

In the *Mahabharata*, it is said that Sage Vyasa, its author, met Dhritarashtra, the father of the one hundred Kaurava princes, on the eve of the great war and warned him of the terrible planetary omens that he had seen. One of the

omens was a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran; another was retrograde Mars before reaching Antares; and yet a third was a lunar eclipse near Pleiades. ... Professor Achar searched for all the years in which there was a conjunction of Saturn with Aldebaran and found one hundred and thirty-seven such conjunctions in history. He then searched for those dates on which Mars was retrograde before reaching Antares. ... Finally, he searched for those dates on which there was a lunar eclipse near Pleiades and was left with just a single date on which all three astronomical events happened simultaneously. ... From the exercise conducted by Professor Achar, it is evident that the Mahabharata war must have occurred in 3067 BCE – around five thousand years ago. (Sanghi, *Krishna Key* 8-9)

Considering *Mahabharata* as a historical text rather than an epic, Saini tries to find evidence to support his argument from the text in question itself. He emphasises that the Mahabharata war took place in the year 3067 BCE considering the narrative that Bhishma, the grand-uncle of the Pandavas and the Kauravas, died in the month of Magha. In order to prove his argument, Saini attempts to incorporate historical records from the Greeks.

Saini argues that Megasthenese recorded the first written reference to Krishna, one of the key characters in *Mahabharata*, as *Heracles*. Saini contends that Krishna was mentioned in the Greek records as *Heracles* influenced by Krishna's other name, Hari. He also notes that Megasthenes also had mentioned *Souraseni* and their city of *Methora* which could be understood as Shurasenas, the Yadava

descendants of Vasudeva's father, and Mathura, the city in which Krishna lived, respectively. Saini maintains:

Krishna is recorded by the Greeks as having lived a hundred and thirty-eight generations before the times of Alexander and Chandragupta Maurya. We may take the midpoint of Chandragupta's reign as 307 BCE. Now, assuming twenty years per generation – which is a fairly good average where ancient Indian dynasties are involved – Krishna should have lived 2,760 years before 307 BCE. (12)

Saini also considers *Surya Sidhantha*, an ancient work on astronomy, to prove his point and asserts that, according to this particular work, Kaliyuga began at midnight on 18 February 3102 BCE and Kaliyuga marks the death of Krishna. Thus, the Mahabharata war could have taken place in 3067 BCE not in 2183 BCE as suggested by Achar. He also opines that the war took place somewhere between modern-day Karnal and Ambala. He subscribes to the myth of *Jyotisaar*, asserting that the current banyan tree at that location is “an offshoot of the holy tree under which Krishna delivered the *Bhagawad Gita* to Arjuna” (193). In his narrative regarding the historicity of Krishna as well as *Mahabharata*, Saini uses historical figures, texts and accurate dates to create an aura that what he tells is the truth.

The novel also proposes a possible reason for Krishna being presented in mythology in two diametrically opposite ways: as the “ruthless warrior” who appears in the Mahabharata war and as a cowherd who is a “combination of innocence and fun.” Saini hypothesises that when the Saraswati River dried up, people needed to migrate to various places including the Ganges valley, the Indus

basin or the Tigris-Euphrates valley. When they reached the new valley they had to “revive their cattle population and the easiest way of doing this was to make their icon – Krishna – into a cowherd”. Saini assumes Krishna got the image of the cowherd in an attempt to preserve and develop the agricultural way of life of the successors of the Saraswati civilisation. By indicating that people from the Saraswati civilisation had to move in different directions in the past, Sanghi also backs up the argument that Aryans did not come to India, but they were the inhabitants of the land who later spread out to various parts of the world.

In Saini’s view, most of the stories about Krishna’s early life are fabricated. “Krishna was a great statesman and strategist. ... The tales about his being a playful and naughty cowherd were added on much later,” opines Saini (321). Similarly, Saini in the novel opines that Radha-Krishna stories were created much later, for Radha’s name is not mentioned in *Srimad Bhagavatham* and the first record about Radha appears in the poem *Geet Govind* written more than four thousand years after the life of Krishna. He observes, “The reality is that Krishna-devotion is so deeply entrenched in most of the region that it’s virtually impossible to distinguish history from myth” (322). Devdutt Pattanaik also opines that there is “a stark contrast between the two halves of Krishna’s life” in mythology which suggests “a forced amalgamation of two biographies and the transformation of the amalgamated hero into a manifestation of God (168). Though Saini affirms the possibilities of mythology being partially or completely fiction or imagination regarding the earlier life of Krishna, Saini overlooks the broader application of this possibility to all

mythological narratives. He adopts a selective perception, dismissing anything that contradicts his opinions and beliefs.

Even when firmly believing in the historicity of *Mahabharata*, Saini admits that it is not easy to distinguish fact and myth entangled in the tales of Krishna. He points out that there are two Krishna Janmasthan temples, where Krishna is believed to be born, in Mathura. And Saini finds the existence of one of the Krishna Janmasthan temples near an old fort in ruins which is called Kansa Quila, from where Kansa could have ruled Mathura. Saini believes that Krishna would have been born in the dungeons of the Kansa Quila rather than where the temple is located. Another inconsistency Saini makes note of is that there are two towns named Mahavan and Gokul which claim to be the original Gokul where Krishna was brought up with Nanda and Yashoda. Both the towns have Putana Mandir and Nanda-Yashoda Bhavan representing the spot where Krishna had killed Putana and the house where Krishna lived respectively. The existence of multiple spots claiming association with the mythological events indicates the irrelevance of validating the historicity of mythology.

Nikhil Bhojaraj, an archaeologist in the novel, also tries to prove the historicity of *Mahabharata* through his expeditions to verify that Dwaraka, the city of Krishna, had existed in reality. He puts forth the hypothesis that if Dwaraka existed, Krishna must also have existed. Saini observes that the modern Dwaraka was not the Dwaraka of Krishna and the ancient Dwaraka lies submerged under the sea. The young Tamil assistant to Bhojaraj, who escorts Saini and Priya in Gujarat, upholds that:

The coast of India was several miles further out into the sea during Krishna's times. If we continue our explorations outwards along the ocean floor we will find older remains. Dwaraka is a continuum – a city that was built and rebuilt seven times. The most recent construction is modern-day Dwaraka city but the oldest is out in the ocean, where rising sea levels have inundated it. We've estimated that it is nine kilometres along the seabed of the Gulf of Kutch at a depth of between twenty-five and forty metres! (Sanghi 66)

Bhojaraj's assistant believes that they can find Krishna's Dwaraka which lies underwater through their excavations. To support his argument, he quotes *Harivamsa* which indicates that Krishna reclaimed land from the ocean to build his city. The assistant argues that "In ancient texts, even science was conveyed in magical terms" and the complex task of land reclamation "has been described as praying to the ocean to yield twelve yojanas of land" (70). Since all the structures that they have found so far during their excavation are built on boulders, not on the ground, the assistant argues the city they have found underwater is Krishna's Dwaraka which was built through land reclamation by dropping boulders into the sea. Since most of the characters in *Krishna Key* are guided by confirmation bias, they attempt to prove their claims by disregarding alternative possibilities.

Saini conceives Upanishads and Vedas as divine texts, the authenticity of which should not be doubted. At one moment, to support his view that Krishna is a historical figure, Saini looks away from *Mahabharata* and turns towards the Upanishads. He maintains,

... you may hold the view that the *Mahabharata* is just a story, but how do you explain Krishna's name appearing in the *Upanishads*, works of the highest spiritual magnitude? Krishna is even mentioned in the *Rigveda* as the seer of Vedic hymn. He is once again mentioned in the *Atharvaveda* as the slayer of the Keshi demon. No, it would be impossible for Krishna to figure in these ancient works if a historical personality by that name did not exist.

(168)

Saini is unable to think that Upanishads and Vedas could be works of literature or works of philosophical thoughts which contain thoughts of human beings just like Plato or Socrates; rather he considers them as holy and divine literature which cannot be challenged. Portraying *Mahabharata* as a historical text, rather than an epic, Sanghi attempts to validate the historicity of the characters as well as the events in it.

Following motivated reasoning, the characters in *Krishna Key* search for evidence that corroborates their preconceived beliefs regarding the historicity of *Mahabharata*. They conveniently overlook contradictory evidence and narrate a probable alternative history which, however, lacks historical substantiation. The narrative these characters put forward could be categorised as “post-truth history” which denotes:

... the communication of false information on a historical phenomenon that appeals to emotion and personal belief, where both the purveyor and recipient are indifferent to historicity and contemptuous of expert opinion

that contradicts it, and where the underlying objective is ideological, especially in support of a collective identity. . . (Gudonis and Jones 8)

The major characters in *Krishna Key*, including Saini and Mataji, are “sympathisers” of a “cause” concerning the establishment of the supremacy of ancient Vedic people and their historicity. They act as “dedicated truth seekers . . . [m]imicking the scientific approach, they pursue wisdom by being critical towards established authorities with questionable qualities and intentions.” However, the “morally driven motivation increasingly pushes them away from proper research findings rather than towards them.” They “draw ahistorical concatenations, parallels, and conclusions as long as they serve the goal of and resonate with the worldviews and emotions” (Czerep 35). Ashwin Sanghi’s characters discard the recorded history of the nation in favour of their post-truth history by accusing the former as Western propaganda. The mainstream and established sources of history are labelled as a “specifically suspicious category of ‘them’” whose views should be “distrusted by default” (36). The established sources, thus, are often branded as the privileged “elite” who stand against the “people” in the populist discourse.

While *Krishan Key* attempts to depict the Mahabharata war as a historical event, in *Asura*, the Rama-Ravana war is portrayed as another historical occurrence. However, in contrast to the popular myths, Anand Neelakantan narrates the Rama-Ravana war not as a war over Ravana’s desire for Sita, but rather as a battle rooted in conflicting values. According to Bhadra, the Rama-Ravana war occurred not just in the name of Sita but, it was the final war between good and evil: “We were

fighting for our culture, our race, our way of life, and our traditions” (Neelakantan 349). Bhadra states:

People had hated Ravana initially for what they saw as his lust for Sita and the misfortune it brought to Asuras. But when the people heard the rumours that Sita was an Asura princess, our own King’s daughter, they recoiled at the thought of leaving the princess in the hands of Rama. (348)

Thus, the war in the novel ceases to be depicted as a personal matter between Rama and Ravana and emerges as a war between two races over values and convictions.

The popular mythological narratives hold that Ravana kidnapped Sita to take revenge on Rama and Lakshmana on behalf of Surpanakha whose breasts and nose were cut off by Lakshmana. However, Neelakantan has another story to present. According to the novel, Ravana decides to kidnap Sita not to avenge his sister but to safeguard his daughter from the men who had dared to cut off a woman’s breasts and nose without any second thought. In *Asura*, as in *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Sita is the abandoned daughter of Ravana. Ravana believes that it would be unsafe for Sita to remain with Rama and Lakshmana in the forest. He contends that it might be wiser to keep Sita in Lanka until Rama’s voluntary exile comes to an end. Ravana contemplates:

Secretly, I hoped that once I had brought her to Lanka and she had seen her father’s dazzling home, she would persuade her husband to stay with us. It wasn’t that I had suddenly developed a liking for the man, but I was willing

to accept him. I was even ready to give Rama a portion of my northern empire. (Neelakantan 310-311)

Ravana anticipates that Sita will not accept him as her father even if she is told the story of her birth. She secretly wishes that she will decide to live with him after recognising the truth. Ravana even prepares his mind to accept Rama whom he does not like at all. Even when Ravana's young son Akshaya is burnt alive in the fire set by Hanuman, Ravana is not angry with Sita. He decides to stand up for her even if he has to sacrifice so much because of his guilty conscience of abandoning her for a long time. Ravana thinks, "Once I forsook you, but never again. You will understand what sort of a husband you have, only when the protection of your old father ends" (335).

When Ravana learns that his affection towards his daughter has caused too much pain and loss for his people, at one point, Ravana thinks of returning Sita to Rama. It is Mandodari who demands Ravana to reconsider his decision for Sita will not be treated well by Devas because she had lived among Asuras. At that moment, Ravana feels that he has done wrong to his daughter by separating her from her husband. However, he is convinced that her husband is not a good guy and he will not take her back even if Ravana returns her to him. Thus, Ravana decides to battle Rama not to lose his daughter once again. Ravana considers Rama and Lakshmana a strange pair for one of them "was willing to fight and kill thousands of men and women for the sake of a wife he had never wanted, the other left his wife to languish in his palace for fourteen long years" (364). Being told from the perspective of Ravana and Bhadra, the war is portrayed as a noble attempt by a father to safeguard

his daughter. And above that, as Bhadra views it, it becomes a war between two races who uphold contradictory values and morals. Hence, the Rama-Ravana war becomes a war between two humans rather than a mythical war between good and evil.

While retelling the stories of mythological characters, the Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* portray them as historical events that occurred thousands of years earlier. The select novels find historical footings for their storylines by placing mythological figures such as Shiva, Krishna, and Ravana in a historical context. By establishing the mythological characters to the historical backdrop of the Indus civilisation or the Vedic civilisation, these novels create a rich tapestry that blends myth and history seamlessly. By presenting myths as history, the select novels take up a euhemeristic approach. Euhemerism, in a way, is an attempt to rationalise mythology. When myths are being interpreted historically, rational explanations are needed to corroborate the historicity of the events. The jargon of divinity may not be adequate to explain things historically. Hence, the rationalisation of mythology is an integral part of the historical interpretation of mythology. Though euhemerism involves the rationalisation of myths, Nickolas Roubekas distinguishes it from the rationalisation of myth in general.

Rationalizing myth virtually means reading myth not literally but symbolically, thereby making it rational and comprehensible. However, Euhemerus does not read myth symbolically; rather, he transforms myth into history, making adjustments, incorporating these stories in a utopian work, and creating a new story altogether with new elements. Symbolical reading

of myths, on the contrary, is an attempt to peel off all supernatural or implausible elements of a story in order to encounter its truth underneath its various distorting layers. (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 157)

Subsequently, it could be posited that rather than simply rationalising myths, the select mythological fictions lean towards a euhemeristic interpretation, which aims to historicize myths as a means of rationalisation. Instead of seeking meaning through symbolic readings, these narratives seem to strive to establish the historicity of myths by rationalising them.

Myth is often regarded as “hyperbolic history” (Pattanaik 161) suggesting that myths are not mere fabrications but embellished narratives rooted in actual events from the distant past. As Devdutt Pattanaik observes it,

Hindu scriptures rarely differentiate between traditional beliefs and historical data. Hence the oldest collections of myths are known as Itihasas (histories) and Puranas (chronicles). In these documents narratives of gods, kings, and sages trace the history of India from the beginning of time to the prophecies of anarchy that will herald the end of the world. (161)

The significance of myth in historical studies lies in its ability to convey cultural values, societal norms, and collective memories of civilisations. Considering the fact that historians lack material relics to study Indian history for over a thousand years, spanning from the collapse of the urban Indus Valley civilisation to the establishment of the Magadhan empire, understanding this period poses a significant challenge. In the absence of concrete archaeological evidence, myths often become

essential sources for understanding the historical context of this era. According to Pattanaik, Hindu mythology “clearly retain[s] the memory of the integration of three main groups of people whose ideas fermented the Hindu psyche: nomadic herdsmen, settled agriculturists, and animist hunter gatherers of the forest” (162). Thus, in Indian context, myths and epics exist alongside history as a valid way of recording the collective past (Sengupta 9).

However, interpreting myths to gain insights into the past is a distinct process from treating myths as literal historical accounts. When myths are interpreted to understand the past, they are treated as symbolic narratives that reflect the cultural, moral, and philosophical values of a particular time. This method involves analysing the underlying messages, themes, and social norms embedded within these stories to construct an understanding of historical contexts, beliefs, and societal structures. Conversely, interpreting myths as the past means taking these narratives at face value as factual records of historical events. This approach disregards the allegorical and metaphorical nature of myths, which were often used to explain natural phenomena, human behaviour, or divine interventions in ways that were comprehensible to people of that era. Therefore, while myths can provide valuable information about the bygone era, they must be critically analysed and contextualised within their symbolic frameworks.

History enjoys great significance in the contemporary era owing much to the attempts of individuals to glorify their particular ethnic, racial or national identity. Analysing people’s obsessiveness with the past and history in the new era, Constance de Saint-Laurent, et al. argue:

The past has never been as relevant for the present as it is in today's Post-truth world. Not just because many of our political leaders are promising to bring us back to a past that never existed– the Great America of Trump, the Lost Empire of Farage or the French Resistance of Le Pen– but because it seems more and more likely that they are bringing us back to the past as it actually happened . . . (147)

In post-truth discourse, the invocation of a golden past is typically utilised to evoke a sense of loss or decline from that ideal state, suggesting that current societal issues are a deviation from the once-great traditions and values. This narrative technique is often employed by writers to capitalise on public need, promising a return to the greatness and purity of earlier times. It could be stated that “Collective memory has become an important part of the post-truth rhetoric, where it has been used in multiple ways” (de Saint-Laurent 148).

The strategic use of such narratives plays into the emotional needs of the populace to reclaim perceived lost glory, often simplifying complex historical realities into a more digestible and appealing story. Similar to the post-truth narrative regarding the existence of a golden past, the Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura*, postulate that India had a golden past with great achievement. When *Asura* portrays the Indus Valley civilisation as the glorious era in Indian history, Shiva Trilogy and *Krishna Key* present the Vedic civilisation as the age of prosperity.

All these works posit that their protagonists were great human beings, whether endowed with superhuman abilities or not, who once walked the earth. The

epochs in which they existed are depicted as not only intellectually profound but also marked by significant advancements in science and technology. Elements of ethnoreligious pride and consequent Othering of certain other segments of the society present in these novels aid in understanding these narratives in relation to the past history. Mythological fictions crafted in the post-truth paradigm contribute to the glorification of the majoritarian ethnicity, weaving tales that reinforce the perceived superiority of one group over another along with portraying a great past of the nation. The notion of the “great ancient India” depicted in the novels goes hand in hand with the mythological fictional narratives regarding the glorious past of the nation. These novels promote the notion of the pre-existence of the nation: according to them, India has a very long history to trace back as a nation that extends beyond centuries, long before the formation of the nation-state.

They, often, present an alternative history deviating from the existing historical narratives. For instance, the Shiva Trilogy and *Krishna Key* maintain that the early Indus Valley civilisation was established by Aryans, who were the aboriginals of the nation. Playing with the historical timeline, these novels postulate that the Indus Valley civilisation was the Vedic civilisation itself, which could be correctly called the Saraswati civilisation. They, irrespective of existing evidence, suggest that Aryan migration never happened in India. This assertion aligns with a narrative that seeks to root the civilisation’s accomplishments firmly within a particular ethnic group, thereby promoting a sense of ancient lineage and indigenous continuity.

However, *Asura*, following the existing historical records, distinguishes early Indus civilisation from the Vedic civilisation and portrays how Aryan migration influenced the Indus civilisation to be established as the Vedic one. At the same time, Anand Neelakantan, just as Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, presents the ancient Indian civilisation—the Asura civilisation—as a glorious era filled with democratic values. Hence, the select novels, by placing their narratives within specific historical time frames, present myths as plausible historical realities rather than imaginary stories. By embedding mythological events and characters in a well-defined historical framework, these works blur the lines between myth and history, presenting ancient stories as credible episodes that could have genuinely occurred. They present an idealised version of history that caters to a desire to reclaim a perceived majestic past. By rereading historical records and blending myth with history, these novels offer a vision of the past that is not only appealing but also serves to foster a stronger sense of national and ethnic identity.

Chapter 3

From Deities to Humans: Anthropomorphising Mythological Characters

Portraying myths as factual historical events necessitates the rationalisation of mythology and the process of anthropomorphising mythological characters facilitates this rationalisation. Generally, the characters or “actors in myths are Supernatural Beings” (Eliade 6). Since the characters exhibit supernatural power, mythological events naturally attain a mystical quality. Hence, when the supernatural qualities of the characters are removed, myths may appear more plausible and real-life stories. The historical interpretation of mythology posits the possibility of mythological characters being not supernatural, but rather ordinary human beings. According to Euhemerus, gods can be differentiated into two groups: “the heavenly or celestial” gods and “the earthly or human gods” (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 19). According to Euhemerus,

... the former [the heavenly gods] are eternal and thus immortal, whereas the latter [the earthly gods] are mortal. In the first group we find the sun, the stars, the moon and the winds (that is, natural elements and phenomena). In the second group we encounter exemplary individuals who received immortal honor and glory due to their benefactions or power. (qtd. in Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 19)

Providing a clear distinction between the heavenly gods and the earthly gods, Euhemerus posits that Greek gods who appear in myths were kings who once lived

on the earth. They were venerated as gods by the people considering their valour and benevolence.

The deification process can be recognised as a natural progression of human storytelling, where the remarkable deeds and enduring influence of kings and leaders get exaggerated and thereby they ascend to divine status in collective memory. By providing a framework to reinterpret gods as human figures, euhemerism interprets mythological narratives through the lens of historical realism. The process encourages a perception of mythological narratives not as mere fantastical tales but as embellished accounts of historical events and real-life heroes. As Gods are conceived as historical figures who had once lived on the earth, the mysticism of myths gets intertwined with historicity. Interpreting myths in India, some historians maintain that the gods and demons in these narratives represent the migrated and indigenous populations of the land. According to Devdutt Pattannaik:

Some historians believe that such narratives came into being when certain Indo-European nomads (yagna-performing, cow herding aryas, mythologically identified as gods and humans, or devas and manavas) made their way into India from the north west. They invaded settled communities (of serpent-worshipping, city-building dravidas, mythologically identified as asuras, yakshas, rakshasas, and nagas), which had driven out autochthonous tribal cultures (totemic and animistic communities, mythologically identified as vanaras, garudas, bhalukas, and nishadhas). (164)

The intertwining of mythological identities with historical communities reflects how myth and history merge, and how myths embody historical interactions and

conflicts. This convergence of myth and history provides a historical dimension to mythological beings, allowing them to be viewed not merely as products of imagination but as representations of historical people.

The anthropomorphisation of mythological figures also serves to make the myths more relatable to human experience. Most of the major characters in Indian myths possess anthropomorphic bodies. The select primary texts, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key* and Anand Neelakantan's *Asura: A Tale of the Vanquished*, further anthropomorphise mythological characters and portray them as historical figures. However, each novel employs a distinct approach to achieve this objective. The story of Shiva, one of the Trimurtis (The three supreme gods) in Hindu mythology, transforms into the story of a historical person in the *Shiva Trilogy*. Amish Tripathi reimagines the mythological hero from a more anthropomorphised and rationalised perspective. Phad Bibhishan Rokdiba, analysing the deconstruction of Shiva, the God, into a human being in the novel, comments:

Though Shiva created by Amish Tripathi is different in many aspects from the mythical Shiva or Shiva in Hindu religion and culture, he does not let the essence of the mythical Shiva slip into faithlessness. In fact, the story of Shiva created and developed by Amish Tripathi strengthens the faith in Shiva—of course, not as the mythical god but as the historical figure. (117)

According to Suresh Kumar, Tripathi has “rendered the mythical characters more relatable and anticipatory, to the modern audience by imagining them in a human form with all their heroic qualities” (398) and has made an “attempt to revive the culture, tradition, history and mythological belief of India” (402).

According to mythology, Shiva is one of the supreme gods in Hinduism who is responsible for destruction whereas Brahma is the God of creation and Vishnu is the God of preservation (Mani 723). Stories related to Shiva, in Indian mythology, are majorly located in Puranas such as *Shiv Purana*, *Linga Purana*, *Markandeya Purana* and *Skanda Purana*. Nevertheless, according to Amish Tripathi, Shiva is an ordinary tribesman who experiences an ascent to divine status and subsequent veneration during the latter stage of his life, primarily attributable to his exceptional leadership skills and valorous deeds. In his introductory remarks, Tripathi asserts that the Shiva Trilogy is a work of fiction intricately interwoven with historical facts. However, what constitutes the ‘historical’ elements and what forms the author’s imagination remains a matter of debate. Reimagining Indian mythology, Tripathi sets up the premise of his trilogy euhemeristically: “What if Lord Shiva was not a figment of a rich imagination, but a person of flesh and blood? Like you and me. A man who rose to become godlike because of his karma” (Tripathi, *Meluha* 13). As Euhemerus suggests, Amish Tripathi rereads the myth of Shiva as an account of the real past; he looks at Shiva not as a divine entity but as a human being who gets deified later in his life by his people.

Mythological characters do not completely shed off their supernatural features or superhuman capabilities in the Shiva Trilogy. Instead, the trilogy provides seemingly rational detailing for supernatural features associated with those characters. As in other myths around the world, Indian mythology is rich with characters that are non-human and superhuman. Mythological characters are often portrayed with certain characteristics that could be termed ‘unnatural’ and they add

to the mystic nature of myths. Tripathi attempts to portray all those important characters associated with the myth of Shiva as normal human beings with some differences and thereby advocates that all of them were historical figures who once lived in India. Unlike in popular mythology, Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, Nandi and all other characters in the trilogy are presented as human beings, not as gods, goddesses or divine beings. The trilogy puts forth apparently logical interpretations for the mystical occurrences and the uncanny physiognomies of the mythological characters.

According to Indian mythology, Siva (Shiva), literally the “auspicious one,” is one of the “Trimurti” or Trinity along with Lord Brahma and Lord Vishnu. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are believed to be the Trio who create, preserve and destroy life in the world. As John Dowson puts it, “the name Siva is unknown to the Vedas, but Rudra, another name of this deity, ... occurs in the Veda both in the singular and plural, and from these the great deity Siva and his manifestations, the Rudras, have been developed” (306). Scholars have various viewpoints on whether Shiva and Rudra are the same deities. *Svetasvatara Upanishad* is apparently the first source in which the two names, Shiva and Rudra, are used alternatively to denote the same deity (Cush et al. 801). In popular myths, Shiva is often portrayed:

with long, matted hair, he is either naked or wearing animal skins, his body is covered in ashes and adorned with snakes. In the locks of his hair rests a crescent moon and through his hair flows the river Ganga. He has a third eye on his forehead and his blue-black throat is often garlanded with snakes and sacred beads known as ‘the eyes of Rudra’ (rudraksa). While meditating, he

is often shown seated on a tiger skin. Nearby lies his special weapon, the three-pronged spear (trisula), and mendicant's bowl. (Cush et al. 799)

Reimagining the mythological Shiva in his trilogy, Amish Tripathi has maintained most of the traditional images but in a deconstructive fashion. Just as the prevalent mythological representations, Shiva in the trilogy also is a great dancer who has a tribal background and ways of life. His native place is situated near the Mansarovar Lake in the Himalayan Mountains and he wears a tiger skin skirt (Tripathi, *Meluha* 3). He smokes marijuana and tries to run away from painful memories by using it. Typically, Gods in myths are depicted as beings beyond mortal frailties and weaknesses. However, by showing Shiva engaging in such a distinctly human activity as using a substance to dull his pain, the trilogy brings him closer to the realm of human experience. Trishul (Trishula or Trisula), with which Shiva is often portrayed, is introduced in the trilogy as the newly found weapon that Shiva designs for the war against Swadeep.

Tripathi's Shiva exhibits human emotions and vulnerabilities rather than divine qualities generally attributed to gods. Though he is portrayed as a man of passion and valour in the trilogy, he is not a perfect man but a person who makes mistakes but re-evaluates his life and tries to come up with sensible resolutions. As the trilogy starts, he is a twenty-one-year-old young man who acts as the chief of the Guna tribe. He decides to migrate to Meluha, a faraway land, with his tribe in order to escape from the continuous conflicts with rival clans. Even if he is a strong warrior, he recognises that he will not be able to defeat his enemies and live in peace if his tribe stays back at their native place. He thinks migration is "*better than*

fighting every day just to stay alive!” (3) Neither Shiva nor his people consider him a divine figure who can rescue the people from every adversity, but rather a brave leader. The transformation of Shiva from a mere human being to that of a God begins as he migrates to Meluha, “the richest and most powerful empire in India” as Nandi calls it (2). Shiva does not consider himself to be a possessor of superpower but a normal human being. Conversing with Daksha, he asks: “What difference will I make? I am no miracle worker. I cannot snap my fingers and cause bolts of lightning to descend upon the Chandravanshis [the enemies]” (118).

Tripathi’s Shiva is portrayed as a typical man who displays affinity towards gender roles of the time, especially when he cracks jokes on women. Upon hearing from Bhadra that women are allowed in the Meluhan army even though there are not too many, Shiva jokes: “No wonder they [the army] are in trouble!” (28) Shiva’s comment displays a lack of respect for women’s capabilities and the societal bias that questions the competence of women, particularly in roles traditionally dominated by men. His comment also underscores the stereotypical representation of women as the reason for every issue. By incorporating such human imperfections into Shiva’s character, Tripathi anthropomorphises a figure often seen as a symbol of perfection and justice. This portrayal renders Shiva not as a distant God, but as a relatable character who embodies personal biases and societal norms, making mistakes and displaying prejudices that are typically human.

Furthermore, in the trilogy, not every decision made by Shiva is depicted as flawless. He is not portrayed as a deity who consistently makes the right choices; rather, he is presented as a human who occasionally acts based on emotions and later

regrets his decisions. Grief-stricken with the murder of Sati, Shiva orders to use the deadly Pashupatiasra to destroy Devagiri, even though, earlier, he had considered using such a destructive weapon to be against humanity. In a moment of wrath, he orders to destroy Devagiri along with the Brahmins who are responsible for producing Somras and all others who are accountable for the murder of Sati. Kartik, the son of Shiva and Sati, observes: “My father is distraught at this point in time. ... The grief of her [Sati’s] death has clouded his mind. He is furious and rightly so” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 510). Hence Kartik takes it upon himself to secretly rescue a group of Brahmins skilled in producing Somras and sage Bhrigu from Devagiri, without Shiva’s knowledge, in order to safeguard and propagate the great wisdom of those people. Reflecting on the event later, Shiva acknowledges that Kartik’s action preserved his honour by ensuring the safety of those individuals (555).

In the Shiva Trilogy, unlike the popular myths, Shiva began to be worshipped once his throat turned blue in colour. Tripathi presents a more rational explanation for the blue throat of Shiva deviating from the traditional narratives. According to popular myths, Shiva’s throat turned blue when he saved the world by consuming a poison called *halahala* (the most potent poison in the universe). While Devas and Asuras were churning the ocean, the *halahala* poison appeared before *Amrut* or *amrit* (the elixir of life) and it had to be managed somehow. Shiva consumed it considering the well-being of the world and kept it in his throat. As a result, his throat turned blue and thereafter he began to be known, popularly, as ‘Nilakantha’ or ‘Neelkanth’ (the blue-throated one) (Cush et al. 802). However,

according to Amish Tripathi, Shiva got the blue throat as an after-effect of consuming Somras since a particular medicine was given to him at a younger age.

Nevertheless, Tripathi has managed to retain the relationship between *halahala* (or *halahal*), one of the most lethal toxins according to the myths, and Somras by presenting Somras as a greater good that turned into greater evil over time. *Halahala*, according to myths, is the “poison produced when the gods and demons churn the Ocean of Milk” and it refers to the “antithesis” of *amrit* or the elixir of life (Lochtefeld 269). From one perspective, Somras is similar to an elixir for it prolongs life and cures diseases. On the other hand, it is proven to be a great evil towards the end of the trilogy. At one point, Ayurvati calls Somras “*halahal*,” establishing the relationship between the two (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 125). Shiva recognises at the end of his quest that Somras has transformed into the great evil of the time for its negative effects have begun to overpower its merits. More children are born with physical deformities as an aftereffect of Somras consumption. The drying up of the Saraswati River is also linked to Somras because water from the Saraswati River is used in large quantities for its production. Above all, the toxic waste produced during the production of Somras has resulted in plague outbursts and other deadly diseases in countries such as Branga. Thus, Somras, the elixir of life and the greatest good of a time, transmutes itself to the *halahal* and greatest evil of another time. Hence, Shiva remarks about his blue throat which was a result of consuming Somras not as a blessing “but a curse of Evil, a mark of poison” (292).

Tripathi’s Shiva, initially, does not perceive himself to be a chosen man and he finds it uncomfortable to be worshipped by a group of people who are “much

more advanced” than himself and his tribe (Tripathi, *Meluha* 28). He considers the Mansarovar lake holy and does not believe in symbolic gods. Entering the temple of Lord Brahma for the first time, he admits that he does not believe in the concept that temples are holy abodes of God. For him, “... god exists all around us. In the flow of the river, in the rustle of the trees, in the whisper of the winds” (47). That is, Shiva’s perception of God and divinity differ from the way the people of Meluha worship him as a deity. Instead of being worshipped, Shiva wishes to be treated as equal to the Meluhan soldiers and nobilities and insists Nandi, Ayurvati and others address him by his name. He feels uneasy about being addressed as “the lord” after being identified as the prophesied Neelkanth. However, he eventually comes to terms with it and embraces his role as the prophesied saviour. He announces himself to be the Neelkanth and the “destroyer of evil” when he realises that “superstition can only be countered by another stronger belief” (250). Thus, Shiva, the human gets deified by his people for his valour and good deeds. As Euhemerus presents the case of Zeus (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 1), Shiva in the trilogy is deified while he is alive.

As a human, in the trilogy, Shiva is presented as a rational being who does not “believe anything” till he has seen the proof. However, he believes that if no proof is available for something at the moment, it is advisable to choose the belief that gives you comfort, even if it is wrong. In his words, “[f]or anything without proof, ... we should believe the theory that gives us peace. It doesn’t matter whether the theory is true or not” (Tripathi, *Nagas* 104). Contemplating the Vikarma system, he encounters mental discomfort since he cannot comprehend whether a person’s karma in the previous birth results in misery in the present life and whether someone

has to be ostracised from society because of their ill fate. In *Meluha*, the Vikarma system is introduced as a significant element of the Meluhan society. It dictates that individuals born with deformities or those who have suffered great misfortunes are labelled as Vikarma, and they are subjected to severe restrictions and social ostracism. Although Shiva does not believe in the Vikarma system, a conflict arises in his mind since the system was advocated by Ram who is revered as a great ruler and a God. Moreover, the people of Meluha believe in it without any doubt. As his personal conviction comes in contrast to the widely held belief, Shiva faces mental discomfort. In order to resolve this discomfort, he decides to “[b]elieve the theory that gives [him] peace and reject the one that causes ... pain” (103). This could be considered as an instance of cognitive dissonance where Shiva decided to stick on to his pre-existing belief rather than following social conformity.

In popular mythology, Shiva has another name, “Gangadhar” because he keeps the river Ganga in his locks. According to mythology, King Bhagirath did *tapas* (strict meditation to endear gods) for thousands of years and persuaded Ganga to come to earth from heaven in order to perform rituals for his ancestors. To save the earth from the destruction of her fierce force, Shiva agreed to receive her on his locks and thus he became Gangadhar; the one who puts Ganga on his locks (Mani 277). Amish Tripathi reinterprets this story and establishes Shiva’s connection with the river Ganga more rationally. In the trilogy, Shiva resolves to alter the course of the Yamuna River to facilitate the drying up of the Saraswati River, thereby ensuring that the Saraswati’s water will no longer be utilised in the production of Somras. Bagirath aids him in this project.

Bhagirath, with the help of Meluhan engineers, had come up with a brilliant plan. The sides of the Yamuna were dug up and giant sluice gates were built along them. These gates, serving as locks, would be opened slowly to guide the Yamuna onto its new course in a deliberate and controlled manner, over many months. Bhagirath had named these sluice gates the ‘Locks of Shiva’. The Yamuna was thus slowly diverted onto its new course, to unite with the Ganga at Prayag. The Locks of Shiva had thereby allowed the Ganga to take its new form, gradually, without the chaos of an uncontrolled flood.

(Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 557)

Unlike in the myths, in the Shiva Trilogy, Ganga is not depicted as a divine entity but as an ordinary river. However, it is stated:

It ... came to be believed that the Yamuna carried the soul of the Saraswati into the Ganga, thus transforming it into the holiest river in India. In a sense, the devotion associated with the hallowed Saraswati had been transferred onto the Ganga. (557)

Furthermore, Bhagirath is not depicted as engaging in religious meditation to receive divine assistance to harness the river water. Instead, he devises a meticulous technological plan. His plan involves digging up the sides of the Yamuna and constructing giant sluice gates, referred to as the “Locks of Shiva.” These gates function as locks to carefully guide the Yamuna River onto its new course, ensuring a gradual and controlled flow that ultimately merges with the Ganga at Prayag. This methodical approach contrasts with the traditional mythological portrayal of Shiva’s miraculous act of capturing the Ganga in his hair to prevent it from flooding the

earth. Thus, in the trilogy, Shiva is not the person from whose locks the river Ganga is flowing out but he is the man who supervised the project which resulted in the new course of the river. In this way, Tripathi's rendition becomes more believable and invites less scepticism regarding the anthropomorphised portrayal of Shiva.

At the same time, though Shiva is presented as a human being in the trilogy, Tripathi comes up with a series of divine mediations in Shiva's journey to deification. The people's attribution of divinity to him did not stem from his exceptional leadership qualities, nor did it result from a scrutiny of his life and activities. The inhabitants of Meluha, except some intellectuals like Parvateswar and Brahaspati, start to believe in his divinity from the very moment they witness his blue throat. It is mainly because the people of Meluha believe in the legend of the Neelkanth; they believe in the legend of the saviour which is a part of their existing belief system. When Shiva asserts that he is not a miracle worker but an ordinary man, Kanakhala says: "The people have faith in the bearer of the blue throat. They will have faith in you" (Tripathi, *Meluha* 118). God Shiva, according to Tripathi, is born out of the legend that prophesies the arrival of the Neelkanth who will be the destroyer of evil. Daksha asserts that "faith is a very potent weapon" with which, he believes, Shiva can lead him to glory.

However, the blue throat of Shiva is not a completely supernatural occurrence in the trilogy, but a combination of a properly executed plan by a member of the "Vayuputra" clan and some kind of divine intervention. Vayuputras is a group of selected intellectuals of the land, who are supposed to select and train great leaders to protect the land from evil. Shiva's uncle, Manobhu, one of the

members of the Vayuputra council, recognises Shiva as the next Neelkanth, the saviour, and gives him a medicine which, eventually, turns his throat blue in colour as he consumes the Somras. Nevertheless, the Shiva Trilogy proposes that even though the blue throat was a humanly executed plan, it worked for Shiva because he was the one “chosen by *Paramatma* (almighty)” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 106). Gopal, the chief of the tribe of Vasudevs who are destined to help Mahadev, states that the administration of the Vayuputra medicine and the intake of Somras “have to be done at specific time periods” to turn one’s throat blue (104). According to him, Shiva was “given the Vayuputra medicine at the right age” and he “arrived in Meluha at the appropriate time” and was administered the Somras at the proper time as if Shiva was led by some divine spirit. Thus, even though the blue throat of Shiva in the trilogy is a result of human actions, it is indicated that Shiva was led to his destiny by some divine power.

In the portrayal of Shiva as an ordinary human being, Tripathi does not dismiss the potential for some extraordinary attributions to his character. In the trilogy, the “third-eye” of Shiva is presented as proof of divine intervention in Shiva’s life. Shiva’s third eye is portrayed as a “deep red blotch on Shiva’s forehead, right between his eyes. It was not the colour of a blood clot. It was a much deeper hue, almost black” (Tripathi, *Meluha* 393). Gopal explains the third eye as one of the seven ‘chakras’ or vortices within the human body located in the region between one’s brows which allows the reception and transmission of energy. “The Parihan system of medicine believed that the pineal gland, which exists deep within our brain, is the third eye” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 112), he adds. According to Gopal,

yogis activate their third eye through years of practice or, Vayuputras, who are supposed to assist the Mahadev in his transformation, help the potential candidate of Mahadev to activate his third eye using medicines. However, Gopal finds Shiva's third eye a special case for he was neither a yogi nor his third eye was activated through medication. Consequently, Gopal is convinced that Shiva is the chosen one.

Along with the attempt to rationalise the concept of the third eye using scientific jargon, Tripathi presents it as an exceptional feature of Shiva that makes him different from other human beings. And it is stated that Shiva has been suffering a burning sensation between his brows since his childhood days which indicates that his third eye was activated since his birth. Gopal identifies that it is very rare to have an active third eye from the time of one's birth. Gopal conceives it as evidence of *Paramatma's* (the almighty's) intervention in Shiva's life. Thus, Shiva is portrayed as a special human being in the trilogy. By demystifying the myth, Tripathi does not invalidate people's faith in Shiva. Rather, he finds a more reasonable and rational ground to validate the mythical Shiva. As Phad Bibhishan Rokdiba puts it, "Amish Tripathi tries his best to validate the mythology but in attempting to do so, he also violates it" (136). Regardless, this violation of mythology does not affect the glory of the mythological character, rather it transplants the myth into a more believable realm for the modern discourse.

Rudolf Bultmann introduces the concept of "demythologisation" as a means to present Kerygma (the preaching of the Christian gospel) to appeal to the modern audience. He argues that "theology must undertake the task of stripping the Kerygma from its mythical framework, of 'demythologizing' it" (3). Bultmann's

concept of demythologisation is a mode of demystification which involves critical examination and interpretation of myths to reveal their underlying meanings, structures, and socio-cultural contexts. This approach seeks to strip away the supernatural elements and symbolic mystique that often surround myths, presenting them instead as reflections of human thought, societal values, and historical realities.

As Robert A. Segal observes:

... Bultmann reads myth symbolically. In his celebrated, if excruciatingly confusing, phrase, he 'demythologizes' myth, which means not eliminating, of 'demythicizing', the mythology but instead extricating its true, symbolic meaning. To seek evidence of an actual worldwide flood, while dismissing the miraculous notion of an ark harbouring all species, would be to demythicize the Noah myth. To interpret the flood as a symbolic statement about the precariousness of human life would be to demythologize the myth.

(47)

Through demythologisation, while myths may be stripped of their supernatural elements, their significance as reflections of human cognition and societal values remains intact. Amish Tripathi, in the Shiva Trilogy, demythologises several elements and tries to come up with rational explanations for mystical events and supernatural appearances in myths.

However, Tripathi does not follow a downright euhemeristic approach in his analysis of mythology; even though he presents the myth of Shiva as an exaggerated version of the past, the novelist suggests that what we consider superhuman today would have been normal or humanly possible during the ancient times. Tripathi does

not wholly discard the extraordinary capabilities attributed to mythological figures, nor does he categorise them as mere exaggerated tales. Instead, he posits that these ancient personas could have potentially possessed certain abilities that contemporary society regards as superhuman. In *Vayuputras*, he states that the descendants of ancient Indians had lost their rich heritage and wisdom. Consequently, they became ignorant of what their ancestors were capable of and began to consider the great people of antiquity as superhuman and godlike.

These descendants beheld gods, in what were great men of the past, for they believed that such great men couldn't possibly have existed in reality. These descendants saw magic in what was brilliant science, for their limited intellect could not understand that great knowledge. These descendants retained only rituals of what were deep philosophies, for it took courage and confidence to ask questions. These descendants divined myths in what was really history, for true memories were forgotten in chaos as vast arrays of *daivi astras* used in the Great War ravaged the land. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 565)

Tripathi, thus, proposes that the divine powers that we ascribe to gods today may have been within the purview of individuals in antiquity, particularly those who possessed specialised expertise or skills. Conversely, according to the Shiva Trilogy, the deification of Shiva, the human being, took place through the ages both by the exaggerated nature of the retelling of narratives as well as the incapability of the descendants of a great generation to comprehend their eventful past.

Rudra, a Vedic God, who is often considered a form of Shiva (Mani 654) or identified with Agni or Indra (Cush, et al. 694), is also presented as a historical figure in the Shiva Trilogy. Rudra is portrayed as the Mahadev who had won over the Asuras and brought peace to India. According to the legends among the Meluhans, the major temple in his name, situated in Kashi, was built during his lifetime. The very act of constructing a temple of worship for a living being, showcasing the fathom of the devotion of his people to him. Sati opines: “He was a great man ... A true God” (Tripathi, *Nagas* 64). In Sati’s view, Rudra became a great God since he proved himself to be a great man.

The story of Sati has also been altered drastically by Tripathi, although the basic story of Sati remains the same as that of the prevalent myths. Sati in the trilogy, as in the popular myths, is the daughter of King Daksha and she is the spouse of Shiva. According to mythology, she was the beloved daughter of King Daksha. However, she married Shiva against her father’s wishes and Daksha developed a strong hatred toward her along with Shiva. Once, Sati visited her family to participate in a *yajna* organised by Daksha even though she hadn’t been invited to the ceremony. Daksha humiliated her during the *yajna* and, consequently, Sati killed herself by entering the *yajna* fire (Cush et al. 771-72). In the Shiva Trilogy, Sati is a warrior princess born to Daksha and she was first married to Chandandhwaj who was killed ninety years before she met with Shiva. Amish Tripathi presents Ganesh as the son of Sati and Chandandhwaj. Such a character named Chandandhwaj is not present in popular mythology and according to the popular myths, Ganesh is always depicted as the son of Shiva and Sati. In contradiction to the existing myths, in the

trilogy, Sati marries Shiva with the blessings of her father. However, later Daksha develops enmity toward Shiva when he realises that Shiva will not support his selfish motives. In the Shiva Trilogy, Sati does not take her life by entering the *yajna* fire, but she dies battling against a group of assassins set up by Daksha to murder Shiva.

According to myths, Sati and Parvati are distinct characters, yet they represent the same energy; following her self-immolation, Sati takes the *avatar* (incarnation) of Parvati as the daughter of the mountain king Himavan and his wife Mena (Cush et al. 592). In Hinduism, *avatar* refers to “the descent” or “incarnation” of a deity “on earth.” Generally, the term refers to the physical manifestations of the God Mahavishnu on earth, though *avatars* of other divinities are also present in Hindu mythology (Lochtefeld 72-73; Mani 78). On the other hand, according to Amish Tripathi, Parvati is just another name for Sati which is attributed to her for being the goddaughter of Parvateshwar, the chief of the Meluhan army (Tripathi, *Meluha* 92). Diverging from the widely accepted myth of the reincarnation of Sati, Tripathi eliminates the concept of supernatural rebirth, rendering his character more human in essence.

The story of Veerbhadra (Virabhadra) is also modified in the trilogy to anthropomorphise and thereby to provide a historical footing to the character. The mythological Veerbhadra is born out of the wrath of Shiva and he is considered one of the bodyguards of Lord Shiva. According to *Devi Bhagavata*, both Veerbhadra and Bhadrakali were born out of Shiva’s anger when he struck his matted hair on the ground after hearing the news of Sati’s immolation. According to “Santi Parva” of

Mahabharata, Veerbhadra was born out of Shiva's mouth to destroy Daksha's *yajna* in order to avenge Sati's death (Mani 859). However, in the Shiva Trilogy, Bhadra, that is Veerbhadra, is not a supernatural creature born out of Shiva's wrath, but a human being. He is portrayed as Shiva's friend and companion from childhood and a fierce warrior just like Shiva. In the process of anthropomorphising the character, Amish Tripathi has removed the supernatural elements associated with his birth. However, Tripathi retains the strong bond between Shiva and Bhadra by depicting the latter as Shiva's unwavering companion.

Nandi, the supernatural bull in myths on which Shiva rides and who acts as the gatekeeper at Kailasa, the abode of Shiva (Cush et al. 534), also transforms into a normal human being in the Shiva Trilogy. In the trilogy, Nandi is a human being who works as a captain in the Meluhan army. He is the one who reaches out to Shiva and his tribe living across the mountain and invites them to Meluha on behalf of King Daksha. Nandi has been a constant presence in the life of Shiva since Shiva migrated from Mount Kailash (Kailasa). Instead of portraying him as a mystical bull, Tripathi establishes an association between Nandi and a bull, by introducing the concept of the "chosen-tribe." Nandi, according to Tripathi, adorns an amulet bearing the emblem of a bull, symbolising his identification with his chosen tribe. Tripathi introduces the concept of the chosen tribe in relation to one's occupation and caste. Nandi states:

Each chosen-tribe takes on jobs which fit its profile. Every Meluhan, in consultation with his parents, applies for a chosen-tribe when he turns twenty-five. Brahmins choose from birds, while Kshatriyas apply for

animals. Flowers are allocated to Vaishyas while Shudras must choose from amongst fish. ... My chosen-tribe is a bull. (Tripathi, *Meluha* 39)

Thus, in the Shiva Trilogy, Nandi is not a supernatural bull, but a human being whose chosen-tribe is represented by a bull.

The notion of the chosen-tribe is also used to rationalise the ‘goat-headed’ Daksha in mythology. According to myths, Daksha was killed by Virabhadra as per the order of Shiva to avenge Sati’s immolation. However, other Devas brought Daksha back to life by replacing a goat’s head in place of his lost head (Mani 194). Excluding the mystical aspect of resurrection after death and the eerie quality of living with a goat head, Amish Tripathi retains the association of Daksha with the goat by representing the emblem of his chosen-tribe as the goat (Tripathi, *Meluha* 292). Thus, with the notion of the chosen-tribe Tripathi rationalises the mystical elements in the characters of Nandi and Daksha.

The supernatural aura around Parashuram (Parasurama) is also discarded in the Shiva Trilogy. Parashuram is believed to be the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu according to Hindu mythology (Lochtefeld 73; Mani 82). According to myths, Vishnu had undertaken complete as well as partial incarnations. His complete incarnations are known as *dasavataras* (the ten incarnations) which include Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Varaha (pig), Narasimha (lion-man), Vamana (dwarf), Parasurama, Rama, Balabhadramana, Krishna, and Kalki (Mani 79). However, some scholars include Buddha as the ninth *avatar* of Vishnu instead of Balabhadramana (Bassuk 23; Lochtefeld 73). It is observed that “the avatar doctrine is generally seen as a way to assimilate existing cults into the pantheon by claiming that various

deities are merely different manifestations of Vishnu” (Lochtefeld 73). According to popular myths, Parashuram, the sixth avatar of Vishnu, was born to Jamadagni, a sage, and his wife Renuka. A significant episode in Parashuram’s life involves the beheading of his mother in accordance with his father’s order. However, Parashuram in the trilogy, is a Brahmin turned bandit who had killed his own mother. In mythological accounts, Parashuram took the life of his mother in compliance with his father’s command, and subsequently, upon being granted a boon, he demanded the resurrection of his mother (Mani 340).

In Amish Tripathi’s narrative, Renuka, the wife of Jamadagni and the mother of Parashuram, was tortured by her Kshatriya relatives annoyed by her marriage to a sage. Her relatives beheaded her husband and killed all her sons and students at the ashrama except Parashuram, who was not there at the time. She was allowed to survive as a cautionary example for those who might contemplate disgracing their families by marrying someone who belongs to a different caste. Incapable of leading a peaceful life thereafter, Renuka orders Parashuram to behead her and he obeys it recognising the miserable condition of his mother. Hence, in the trilogy, Parashuram is not depicted as an individual who slew his mother solely to heed his father’s command. Rather, he is presented as someone who engages in a form of euthanasia driven by a rationale. Moreover, in contrast to the myths, in the trilogy, Renuka is not killed for being late in fetching water for her husband. Tripathi reduces the gravity of Parashuram’s action of killing his mother by altering the story and portraying it from a different perspective. With a slight twist in the traditional tale, Tripathi manages to portray Jamadagni also in a favourable light rejecting the

mythological version that he has ordered his sons to kill his wife in a rage. Further, Tripathi does not take up the resurrection of Renuka as it might question the believability of his narrative.

Another mythological narrative concerning Parashuram revolves around his vengeance towards *kshatriyas*, the caste of warrior kings. As Vettam Mani notes, Parashuram has fought with *kshatriyas* twenty-one times according to chapter twenty-nine of “Aswamedha Parva” in *Mahabharata* (569). In mythology, Kartyaviryarjuna, a *kshatriya* king, slew Jamadagni in order to acquire his divine cow. In retaliation for the murder of his father, Parashuram relentlessly pursued and exterminated the *kshatriyas* on twenty-one occasions. Amish Tripathi avoids mentioning the divine cow in his narrative since the presence of one may complicate his rationalisation process. Instead, by connecting the murder of Jamadagni with that of Renuka, he modifies the murder of the sage as a case of honour killing. According to Tripathi, Parashuram avenged his father’s murder by killing every *kshatriyas* who were responsible for it. The Shiva Trilogy, thus, establishes a correlation with Parashuram’s twenty-one acts of vengeance by asserting that the king had dispatched armed brigades to capture the bandit Parashuram twenty-one times and Parashuram defeated all of them.

Ayurvati is another character that Tripathi brings into his story who is not part of popular myths. Tripathi could have potentially crafted a character like Ayurvati by drawing inspiration from the term Ayurveda, one of the medical systems originating from the Indian subcontinent. She is portrayed as one of the expert doctors in Meluha and she is the one who identifies Shiva as the saviour for

the first time witnessing his blue throat. She is portrayed as a rational being who remains sceptical of all legends, including that of the Neelkanth (Tripathi, *Meluha* 23). Hence, her role as the one who acknowledges Neelkanth enhances the authenticity of the miracle of the blue-throated saviour. As she recites “Om Namah Shivaiv,” the apotheosis of Shiva reaches its culmination point because the “words *Om* and *Namah* were only added to the names of the old gods, never living men” (Tripathi, *Nagas* 343).

The concept of Naga is integral in the process of rationalisation of myth in the Shiva Trilogy. Naga, according to Amish Tripathi, is a group of people whose bodily features make them look like ‘unnatural’ or ‘superhuman’ beings. The concept of Naga assists the novelist in his attempt to provide a rational explanation for the uncanny appearances of mythological characters. Naga has multiple allusions in mythology, and generally, the term denotes its literal meaning, which is a snake or serpent. However, Tripathi presents Naga as a community in his trilogy. “Amish Tripathi calls them ‘Nagas’ as they strike terror in the heart of the Meluhans” (Rokdiba 142).

Mythological characters like Narasimha, Ganesh, Kali, and Karkotak, who have uncanny physiognomies, are portrayed as Nagas in the trilogy. Narasimha, according to mythology, is the fourth incarnation of the God Vishnu who is half man (Nara) and half lion (Simha). Vishnu took the form of Narasimha in order to bring back peace in the world by killing Hiranyakasipu, a cruel Asura king who had achieved the boon not to be killed by devas, asuras, human beings, or animals. In the Shiva Trilogy, Narasimha is not an amalgamation of a man and a lion or to say, a

man with the head of a lion. On the other hand, he is a human being with unusual physical characteristics. Lord Narasimha in the trilogy is a king who had lived long before Lord Rudra and who was also venerated as a god later. Shiva finds the idol of Lord Narasimha in the Narasimha temple at Magadh and exclaims that he would have been ostracised from society as a Naga if he had been alive.

His mouth was surrounded by lips that were large beyond imagination. His moustache hair did not flow down like most men, but came out in rigid tracks, like a cat's whiskers. His nose was abnormally large, with sharp eyes on either side. His hair sprayed out a fair distance, like a mane. It almost looked as though Lord Narasimha was a man with the head of a lion.

(Tripathi, *Nagas* 40)

Instead of presenting Narasimha as a person with a lion's head, Tripathi depicts him as a Naga whose facial features resemble that of a lion.

Ganesh or Ganesa in mythology is the son of Shiva and Parvati. However, the Shiva Trilogy alters the story a little bit and presents him as the biological son of Parvati but not of Shiva. According to the trilogy, he was born to Sati in her first marriage with Chandandhwaj. The Shiva Trilogy also provides a seemingly rational explanation for the 'elephant-headed Ganesa' as presented in myths. There exist a bunch of stories regarding how Ganesa got the elephant head including the one in which Shiva beheaded Ganesa in a moment of wrath only to subsequently resurrect him by affixing the head of an elephant to his neck. Nonetheless, in the trilogy, Ganesh does not possess an elephant head: instead, being a Naga, his facial features resemble the face of an elephant.

The Naga's forehead was ridiculously broad, his eyes placed on the side, almost facing different directions, his nose was abnormally long, stretching out like the trunk of an elephant. Two buck teeth struck out of the mouth, one of them broken. . . . The ears were floppy and large, shaking of their own accord. It almost seemed like the head of an elephant had been placed on the body of this unfortunate soul. (Tripathi, *Nagas* 222)

Thus, Tripathi provides a plausible answer to the question of how a human being can live with the head of an elephant.

Likewise, Tripathi also presents Kali as a Naga. Kali, literally 'the dark one,' is a Hindu goddess who is often associated with wrath and destruction. According to the *Linga Purana*, Kali emerged from the deceased Parvati, wife of Siva, to defeat Daruka. The typical iconography of Kali is that of a terrifying scrawny woman. She has four hands and "[s]he is naked except for a macabre set of adornments: a necklace of skulls or freshly decapitated heads, a skirt of severed arms and jewellery made from the corpses of infants" (Cush et al. 399). Conversely, Kali, in the Shiva Trilogy, is presented as the twin sister of Sati whom her parents abandoned for being a Naga. In the trilogy, she is not an incarnation of Parvati, but her sister. Tripathi portrays her as the Queen of Nagas. As in the myths, she is an embodiment of wrath and violence in the trilogy too. Nonetheless, Tripathi introduces a modification to the character of Kali by substituting the necklace of skulls with an exoskeleton formation.

Her entire torso had an exoskeleton covering it, hard as bone. There were small balls of bone which ran from her shoulders down to her stomach,

almost like a garland of skulls. On top of her shoulders were two small extra appendages, serving as a third and fourth arm. ... [her] colour was jet black, but the Naga Queen's face was almost an exact replica of Sati's. (Tripathi, *Nagas* 223)

Hence, the superhuman features of Kali get transformed into some physical abnormalities in the trilogy just like that of Narasimha and Ganesh.

Tripathi makes a passing reference to the mythological character Ravan (Ravana) in *Vayuputras*. Ravan, according to mythology, is a cruel Asura king with ten heads who had kidnapped Sita from her husband Rama. Tripathi tries to deconstruct the image of Ravan and presents him as a Naga.

The son of the great sage Vishrava, he [Ravan] was a benevolent ruler, a brilliant scholar, a fierce warrior and a staunch devotee of Lord Rudra. He had some faults no doubt, but he wasn't evil personified, as the people of the Sapt Sindhu would have us believe. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 12)

By identifying Ravan as a Naga, Tripathi suggests that he too was a human being, not a devil or some supernatural being. Tripathi's Ravan possesses both virtues and vices just as any ordinary human being. Nancy Hathaway observes that "[m]ythological characters ... evolve in interesting ways" and "[t]heir personalities and positions mutate with history" (13). In the Shiva Trilogy, Ravan exemplifies this evolution, shedding his traditionally villainous traits to emerge as a more ordinary individual. In *Asura* as well, he is depicted as a heroic figure, representing a significant departure from conventional interpretations.

Like Shiva, Amish Tripathi also presents Ram (Rama) as a human being who is elevated to the status of God as a result of his exceptional ruling. Ram, in the trilogy, predates Shiva, unlike the popular mythology. By presenting Shiva as a successor of Ram, Tripathi's narrative allows ample room to glorify and justify Ram. Ram, in the trilogy, is the one who had established the well-organised Meluhan society. He is portrayed as one of the greatest kings who transformed his society in a revolutionary manner. Though Ram is not presented as a divine being, the novelist identifies him as a chosen man, the seventh Vishnu, just like how Shiva is presented as a chosen man with divine attributes. Tripathi states, "Lord Ram was deeply revered, and many Meluhans worshipped him like a god" (*Meluha* 65). Meluhans, including Nandi, consider Ram a God, not a human being, and offer prayers to him (10).

The character of Bhrigu in the Shiva Trilogy is one of the perfect examples of a person having confirmation bias considering his unwillingness to correct his preconceived notions even in the presence of adequate evidence. Bhrigu, according to the mythology, is one among the *Saptarishis* (the seven great sages) who possess superhuman abilities. In the Shiva Trilogy, Bhrigu, one of the great sages of the land, often visits the emperors of Meluha and Swadeep and intervenes in royal decisions when he sees it necessary. He is convinced that Somras cannot be evil under any circumstances and it should be protected at any cost. Despite being presented with evidence of the adverse effects of Somras, his confirmation bias prevents him from accepting it. He believes Shiva to be a fraud who disguises himself as the legendary Neelkanth. Bhrigu's conviction regarding Somras is so

profound that he goes to the extent of deploying the restricted *daivi astras* (divine weapons) in an attempt to eliminate Shiva and the Nagas, all in the name of safeguarding Somras. He considers his attempt to safeguard Somras as the “fight for India,” and eventually, those who put forth the adverse effects of Somras are conceived as traitors of the nation by him. In his opinion, “they are all against the great Good. They are against the finest invention of Lord Brahma; the one that is the source of our country’s greatness” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 10). Hence, he conceives himself to be the warrior who battles for the nation and those who align against Somras as traitors who work against the national interest. The backfire effect materialises in his case when he is presented with proof of the adverse effects of Somras. Bhṛigu considers those pieces of evidence as part of a conspiracy against the Somras and decides to defend it no matter the consequences. His preexisting belief that Somras constitutes an extraordinary revelation of great societal significance renders him resistant to accepting any conflicting perspective. The very same psychological condition gives rise to the post-truth situation where evidence ceases to matter anymore.

Thus, most of the characters in the Shiva Trilogy are presented neither as supernatural beings nor as normal human beings. Rather, they are human beings with differences. Instead of negating popular myths such as Ganesha’s elephant head, Shiva’s blue throat, or Daksha’s goat head, Amish Tripathi offers rational explanations for them deviating from popular mythology. This approach aids in anthropomorphising the characters while maintaining a connection to their mythological roots. By doing so, Tripathi bridges the gap between myth and reality,

providing a narrative that respects traditional stories while making them accessible and believable in the contemporary context.

Krishna Key by Ashwin Sanghi also follows the historical interpretation of mythology in the portrayal of the myth of Krishna. However, unlike the Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* does not consider its central character, Krishna, as a human being who got deified later in history. The novel, on the other hand, without rejecting the supernatural powers of the mythological characters, attempts to find a historical framework for the myth of Krishna. Ashwin Sanghi conceives mythology as “a glorious lie to uncover a greater truth.” In an interview with Payal Ganguly, titled “Inside the Jacket,” Sanghi opines that “Indian mythology is based on history, historical figures and events” and *Krishna Key* is his attempt to move Krishna “from a mythology to a history reading shelf.” Sanghi portrays Krishna, the eighth *avatar* of Lord Vishnu according to Hindu mythology, as a historical character who had once lived among the people. Yet, unlike Shiva in the Shiva Trilogy, Ashwin Sanghi’s Krishna is not just a human being, but an incarnation of Mahavishnu, one of the supreme gods, as it is portrayed in myths and *Mahabharata*. He is the “[g]od walking the earth among men and women ... the Divine in human form” (Ellwood ix). Sanghi depicts him as a God who had lived on the earth and is a part of the history of the land: Sanghi’s Krishna is an amalgamation of divinity and historicity. Sanghi’s Krishna is an *avatar* of the God Vishnu who is born to fight against evil. He has “special characteristics which distinguish him from mere mortals.” He is “born in supernatural way (Ayonija),” having “no karma to expiate” and he

remembers his “previous lives.” Moreover, he is “conscious of his mission throughout life” (Bassuk 6-7).

Krishna (Krsna) is one of the most revered deities in Hinduism who assumes various roles in his lifespan: he is a “playful child and adolescent lover,” a “warrior prince” and an “advisor to the Pandavas” and the “supreme Lord Narayana” or Vishnu (Cush et al. 429). The life of Krishna is recounted in *Krishna Key* as a parallel story, narrated by Krishna himself. These narrations are abridged versions of the mythical stories of Krishna which recount important events of his life as it is portrayed in various myths. He asserts himself as a divine being with superhuman abilities in the form of a mortal being. Recounting his birth in the first person narrative voice, Krishna states:

It was finally time for me to arrive on earth and I appeared before Devaki and Vasudeva in their prison cell. Seeing me in my omnipotent form, Devaki and Vasudeva fell at my feet. I told them that it was time for me to take birth as their eighth son. (Sanghi 28)

Thus, Sanghi underscores the idea that Krishna was more than a mere human; rather, he was a divine incarnation.

Sanghi preserves the mysticism and supernatural aspects of Krishna’s myths without attempting to rationalise these elements to underscore the human traits of the mythological hero. Instead, Sanghi depicts Krishna as a human touched by the divine, whose life intertwines with miraculous beings and events befitting his status

as an *avatar*. Hence, Sanghi retells the story of how baby Krishna killed Putana, a demon, just as it is portrayed in the myths. Krishna recounts the story:

The demonic witch, Putana, transformed herself into a beautiful woman and reached my foster-parents' home. She told my mother Yashoda that she was the wife of a pious Brahmin and wished to breastfeed me in order to bestow longevity upon me. My innocent foster-mother placed me in Putana's lap blissfully unaware that the milk being fed to me was poisoned. But I—an incarnation of Vishnu—know everything. I bit Putana hard and sucked out her praana from her breast, causing her to die instantly. (Sanghi 56-57)

As in the myths, Putana is a supernatural being in the novel who can change her shape according to her will. Sanghi does not alter the mythological story of Krishna, rather, he attempts to prove Krishna's story is not just a fictional account but a reality of the ancient past. Sanghi's method allows mythological stories to be appreciated both as sacred lore and as potential historical records.

While Amish Tripathi endeavours to provide historical grounding to mythological characters by rationalising their supernatural attributes, Anand Neelakantan, on the other hand, perceives the mystical elements associated with mythological characters as exaggerations. Neelakantan reimagines mythological characters, in *Asura*, as ordinary historical figures devoid of any supernatural powers. Following the method of historical interpretation, *Asura* conceives both Ravana and Rama as mere human beings without any supernatural capabilities. Observing *Asura* as an example of alternative reading, Aswathi S. Nair contends it to be a text that “questions the authenticity of the heroes and God-like figures in the

epic” (11). According to her, the novel acquires a realistic aura “when the characters attain roles as normal, common ambitious human beings who thrive for their existence” (14). It could be asserted that, in *Asura*, “every character including Rama and Ravana is human, only differentiated from the other by their caste and love of power” (Singh 230). Ravana, the protagonist in *Asura*, is not a supernatural being but a normal human being: “He is a loving but shy husband, a caring brother who is cheated by his own brother Vibhishana, who is led to death by the deeds of his immoral sister Shoorpanaka” (R and Nair 765). Neelakantan’s novel is structured as a narrative of the history of Ravana and his race known as Asura.

Revisiting *Ramayana*, Anand Neelakantan offers a deconstructive reading of Ravana—a human being who had established a kingdom for himself aiming for a better life for his community. Ravana, the antagonist in the epic becomes the protagonist in his novel who has struggled bravely for the upliftment of his people. Ravana, according to the epic *Ramayana*, is the Rakshasa king of Lanka who possesses ten heads. According to *Kamba Ramayana*, he is the first son of Visravas, grandson of Brahma and Kaikasi, daughter of Sumali (Mani 645). Vettam Mani defines Rakshasa as a sect of Asura who is evil in nature. Nevertheless, it is noted that in the earliest sections of the *Rigveda*, the term ‘Asura’ was employed to signify ‘divine’ or ‘the supreme spirit,’ but over time, its connotation underwent a complete reversal (Dowson 28). Amish Tripathi, in the Shiva Trilogy, also mentions how the term Asura became equal to devilish nature whereas it is considered divine in some other places. Meanwhile, Neelakantan distinguishes between Asura and Rakshasa, considering them as distinct entities. According to Neelakantan, Asura is a race of

human beings whereas, Rakshasa denotes the race of demons or evil beings who are not humans.

The epics portray Rakshasas as demons and enemies of the gods or Devas. Malyavat, a Rakshasa in *Ramayana*, asserts: “The illustrious grandfather created two parties—gods and asuras, and they resort to dharma and adharma. . . . It has been heard that dharma is on the side of the great-souled gods and adharma is on the side of the rakshasas and the asuras” (Debroy, ch. 6 (26)). Ravana, in popular mythology, is not an exception and he is often portrayed as evil personified. In *Ramayana*, a group of gods approach Brahma, “the creator of the worlds,” and state:

O illustrious one! Through your favours, the rakshasa named Ravana is using his valour to obstruct us in every possible way. We are incapable of subjugating him. O illustrious one! In ancient times, because of your affection, you granted him a boon. Since then, we have had to respect him in every way and have had to tolerate him. The evil-minded one shows his enmity against all those who rise up and oppresses the three worlds. (Debroy, Ch. 1 (14))

Thus, in *Ramayana*, Ravana is portrayed as the enemy of the gods. However, Anand Neelakantan’s Ravana is not a ‘rakshasa’ (demon) but a human being having all kinds of human emotions and passions. However, he is neither portrayed as a perfect individual nor as a paragon of virtue, but rather as an ordinary person who embodies a mix of both strengths and flaws.

Ravana, according to mythology, is the “Rakshasa king of Lanka who had ten heads” (Mani 645). At the outset of *Asura*, with a symbolic interpretation, Neelakantan establishes that Ravana is not literally a ten-headed supernatural being but he is called “*Dasamukha*” (the ten-faced or ten-headed) because of his behavioural traits. Ravana, unlike his teachers, is not willing to believe that humans should shun the nine emotions, other than intellect, including anger, pride, jealousy, happiness, sadness, fear, selfishness, passion and ambition in order to be the perfect human being. Ravana embraces all the emotions as integral to life and believes that all these emotions together make a human being what they are. Ravana maintains that “the shedding of the nine emotions or nine thinking heads,” as his teacher calls them, is impractical (Neelakantan 41). He considers himself a complete human being with all the so-called good and bad emotions. Thus, according to Neelakantan, Ravana began to be known as the *Dasamukha* symbolically to imply his acceptance of all ten emotions. In Neelakantan’s words, “[o]ur epics have used the ten heads of Ravana to symbolise a man without control over his passions—eager to embrace and taste life—all of it” (9). Thus, in *Asura*, Ravana does not possess ten heads unlike normal human beings, rather he himself identifies as *Dasamukha* as he declares: “I will live my life to its full and die as a man should. So ... I shall be a man with ten faces—I am *Dasamukha*” (45).

Neelakantan’s Ravana is a man who does not repent his follies and wrong deeds but he is the one who recognises all his deeds as his own choices and he wishes to start over his life just as it was in the first place. He wishes to live the same life once again on earth rather than securing a place in heaven. He proclaims:

My aim is neither become God nor achieve moksha. At best I think, those are old wives' tales. I do not believe in a heaven where you will be given all that you purposefully denied yourself in this world. I do not believe in rebirth, when I will be born as a Brahmin if I do good deeds in this life—good in the way the Brahmins describe. If being born a Brahmin is the ultimate reward, then I may even refuse to die for fear of being reborn. (45)

Ravana's perspective can be seen as a reflection of his individualism and critical thinking. He emerges as a rebellious leader who values rationality and personal integrity over conforming to established spiritual or societal structures. He is portrayed as someone who relies on his own experiences and judgments rather than succumbing to widely accepted beliefs or traditions. However, Ravana, on his deathbed, recognises that he "had been born to fulfil someone else's destiny. To allow someone else to become God" (19).

According to *Ramayana*, Ravana conquers the world with the help of a boon from Brahma.

Over a long period of time, he has tormented himself through fierce austerities. Brahma, the creator of the worlds and worshipped by the worlds, was satisfied at this. Content, the lord granted a boon to that rakshasa. With the exception of humans, he will not face fear from any other creature.

(Debroy, Ch. 1 (15))

Unlike in the epic, Ravana in *Asura* does not earn some divine boon to become the ruler of Lanka. Rather, he builds his empire through hard work and strategy.

Asura conveys that Ravana's father belonged to the Brahmin caste, while his mother hailed from the Asura lineage. Ravana traces the root of the miseries of his childhood to his birth into the black-skinned Asura race. Nonetheless, he does not harbour disdain for his own heritage; instead, his anger is directed towards society for its devaluation of individuals with dark skin. Ravana recounts that since he and his siblings were half-castes, they were denied education and they were left to peril in poverty. Ravana was ridiculed by his own father as a "black and good-for-nothing evil-spirited loser who was a burden to the world" (Neelakantan 35). However, despite his family's miserable condition in his childhood, Ravana asserts that they never followed the path of wrongdoings.

... we never stayed from the path of righteousness. Our sense of justice differed from what the learned and privileged considered right. We decided our righteousness and we defined our rights in our own way. We learned that the truth could be bent to suit one's needs. Our dharma was based on simple things: a man should be true to his word; he should speak from his heart and shouldn't do anything he considered wrong. One should not cheat even if one was sure to fail. One should honour women and not insult anyone. If there was injustice, we had to fight it at all cost. (20-21)

Ravana recalls that his father named him and his siblings after demons because they did not show any interest in his teachings. His father's Brahmin friends even tried to banish Ravana from the village, accusing him of being possessed by evil spirits and a rakshasa, a demon. Ravana evokes that he was branded a "hothead" and later a rakshasa just because he dared to question the social hierarchy.

Suffering marginalisation and oppression during his childhood, because of his identity of being a black Asura, Ravana becomes determined to alleviate the misery of his people and begins his venture against Kubera, the ruler of Lanka, and the Devas with that motive. As a young man, he dreams of becoming the most benevolent ruler in the world. However, as he starts to wield the authority of kingship, he somehow fosters a sense of superiority over others. He eventually starts to enjoy the power and contemplates, “*It was good to be a king. Even if it was just to kick people’s butts*” (122). As Ravana ascends to the throne, he notices a shift in his demeanour, particularly mirroring the ways of his half-brother Kubera. This realisation dawns on him when he dismisses Rudraka, the army chief, from the court with a mere wave of his hand—echoing the same dismissive gesture Kubera once used. Ravana acknowledges this change with a reflection, “the same arrogant flick of the hand that my brother Kubera used when he sat on the same throne. . . . I knew I was getting arrogant but it was an enjoyable sensation” (155). The enjoyment Ravana derives from his new-found power reveals a deeper, perhaps shady layer to his character.

On his wedding day, an outburst of anger leads Ravana to assault his brother Kumbhakarna violently over his excessive drinking. Witnessing a beaten Kumbhakarna, their mother intervenes by striking Ravana, a gesture he perceives as a profound insult before his court. Reflecting on the incident, he ponders: “She had hit me—in front of my ministers, my servants, and now the story would spread through the country like wildfire—a king who walked in the shadow of his mother’s *pallu*. A king who was treated like a baby by his mother.” This public humiliation

triggers further aggression as he subsequently pushes down his uncle Maricha and forcefully drags his mother by her hair. Although Ravana recognises the atrocity of his actions, admitting, “I was both shocked and shattered, but in some corner of my mind, satisfied and happy,” (178-79) it is clear that his satisfaction stems from a twisted affirmation of his authority. When his mother leaves the court due to the humiliation of being mistreated by him, Ravana feels regret for his actions toward her. However, he quickly recovers from it and reflects on his transformation, noting: “Ravana was no longer a boy. Kingship, from then on, would not be a burden to carry. It came naturally to me. I enjoyed being the King, the Emperor, the lord of the world. That morning, on the day of marriage, Ravana was born again” (183). His initial sadness over his mistreatment of his mother is overshadowed by his acceptance and even enjoyment of his role as a monarch.

Nevertheless, Ravana’s determination to fight against the Deva kingdom was developed out of his eagerness to wipe out injustice and inequality brought by the Deva invasion. He wanted to be remembered through historical records as a man who “against all odds of poverty and opposition, led a spiritually crushed and vanquished people to glory” (208). Bhadra, the mouthpiece of the common Asura in the novel, notes that Ravana steadily garnered his subjects’ respect and goodwill as a king (262). Yet, Bhadra points out that it was primarily the elite among the Asura race who prospered during Ravana’s reign, contradicting the popular belief that his leadership brought prosperity to the entire Asura kingdom. Later in his life, Ravana himself acknowledges that he had overlooked the needs of the poorer citizens in his country. Ravana contemplates:

... I became the darling of the middle-class. I became intoxicated with their praise. They praised me for development and I, stupid fool that I was, thought I was taking my country forward. I saw the glitter of my cities and closed my eyes to the darkness of the shadows where misery clung, smelly and putrid. (432)

However, Ravana, during his reign, attempted to cease the marginalisation of his people, the Asura race.

Nonetheless, Ravana finds that, at times, he himself overlooks his people as inferior succumbing to the popular societal hierarchy of the caste system. When Anarnya, the King of Ayodhya, comments disdainfully that Ravana's touch would pollute him because his mother is a Shudra, Ravana finds himself seeking validation by asserting his Brahmin heritage. Ravana's existential crisis is articulated in a monologue that reveals his internal conflict and struggles with his identity.

... the rascal [Anarnya] had the nerve to say that my touch would pollute him. But then, why did I try to seek his approval by saying that my father was a Brahmin? I wanted to kick myself for that. What did that mean? Was there a racist devil lurking inside me? Or was I uncomfortable with my Asrua identity? ... I ought to have been ashamed. Never again, never again would I consider myself a Brahmin. I hated my fair skin. I hated my height. I was an Asura, the proud inheritor of Mahabali, Hiranya, Hiranyaksha, and scores of mighty Emperors who had shaped Indian civilization. (216)

Ravana's deep-seated insecurities about his race and societal status are revealed when Ananya ridicules him for his pedigree. His initial reaction to cite his Brahmin lineage in the face of insult suggests an internalised prejudice and discomfort with his own Asura identity. His subsequent reaction—a fierce rejection of any Brahmin association—signifies a turning point where he confronts and renounces the societal norms that valorise Brahmin lineage over his Asura heritage. This rejection is a powerful affirmation of his pride in his lineage, as he chooses to fully embrace his identity as an Asura, an heir to the legacy of powerful rulers.

Ravana in *Asura* is a person of emotions and passion who identifies music as his true interest. He refers to Chandrhasa, created by a famed blacksmith, as his beloved sword which he had named “like a small child” and he was “extremely possessive about it” (270). According to mythology, Chandrhasa was gifted to Ravana by Shiva, one of the three superior gods. Ravana in *Asura* dismisses such a claim of godly intervention in his life and he marks himself as a rational being. The mythical Triambaka bow is also believed to have been used by Shiva once. In the novel, during Sita's swayamvara, when Ravana hears the claim that the bow, Triambaka, was once used by Lord Shiva himself, Ravana dismisses the claim and thinks that it could be a fictional narrative to give a thrill. Observing the bow, Ravana concludes that Shiva definitely could not have used that bow for the bow could never be strung owing to its weight imbalance on either side.

Neelakantan's Ravana is a rational, insightful human being rather than the demonic rakshasa who fights against the gods as traditionally depicted in myths. Ravana's rational and critical approach to religion and his condemnation of its

institutional abuses portray him as a revolutionary figure who challenges the status quo. This attitude contrasts with the traditional portrayal of Ravana as an antagonist to the divine order, embodying chaos and evil. The young Ravana, in *Asura*, recognises that many of the rituals and beliefs are framed just to nourish the Brahmin community who pretends to be the people of the God. Though he is not an atheist, but a person who strongly believes in God, Ravana identifies that gods have become a tool of oppression in the hands of some people. For Ravana in *Asura*, temples are looting stations where people are forced to leave their earnings for the gods residing in those temples. And he accuses the people who claim to be gods' representatives are plunderers who rob in the names of gods. According to Ravana, the society and its practices are developed in a way to support the oppressors: "Money, caste, rituals, traditions, beliefs and superstitions all conspired together to crush the humble majority" (Neelakantan 23).

Ravana resents Brahmins and their rituals. In his view, "[i]nstead of making themselves useful, the Brahmins prayed to the gods they themselves invented for the rain, the sun, horses, cows, money and many other things" (23). Rejecting the notion of divine legitimacy of gods, Ravana emphasises that gods are "created" by people to establish their superiority. By creating gods for every aspect of life—rain, sun, livestock, and wealth—they positioned themselves as the essential intermediaries between these divine forces and the people. These inventions of gods for natural and material phenomena allow Brahmins to claim exclusive knowledge and control over these aspects of life. Sarcastically, Ravana comments that whatever Brahmins are

doing in the name of *yajnas* is actually not useless but “it served as a perfect tool to mint money and gain material favours” (23-24).

Ravana is concerned about the common people who are exploited in the names of gods and rituals. He thinks it is funny that common people like masons and farmers, who toil all their lives and contribute to the well-being of society, are seen as inferior to the Brahmins who do not actually involve themselves in any productive activities. Ravana sarcastically comments that Brahmins will conduct a *puja* for anything whether it is to cure an ailment or to get rid of one’s wife. He continues:

You wanted to have a calf or your wife to have son, the Brahmin would help you. He would just conduct a *puja* and a divine calf or son would be born. You curried favour with the Brahmins and your son would become the biggest pundit in the world by the age of sixteen. If not, he would perhaps become rowdy like me, who did not respect Brahmins or rituals. He would become a *Rakshasa*. (24)

Ravana recognises that people are being looted and oppressed in the name of God and rituals. By reinterpreting the character of Ravana, *Asura* suggests that Ravana’s opposition to the Devas was rooted not in inherent malevolence but in his principled stand against corruption and exploitation.

When the epic portrays Rama as an incarnation of Mahavishnu, *Asura* presents him as a privileged human being, a member of the Vishnu clan—a prestigious family among the Devas. Neelakantan’s Rama is “a simple prince

weakened and manipulated by the stronghold” of societal norms (Jain 149). For Ravana, Rama is the person, his son-in-law, who had made his daughter’s life miserable. Ravana hates Rama for choosing to live a life of hardship in the forest for fourteen years with Sita. Ravana hates Rama for “his false ego and eagerness to prove his self-righteousness to the world” (Neelakantan 304). Neither Ravana nor the majority of Asura people consider Rama a God or an incarnation. However, Vibhishana considers Rama as the “earthly manifestation” of “the supreme power of *dharma*” and the “*avatar* of Vishnu” (459).

In a manner akin to the stripping away of the supernatural attributes associated with the mythical figures of Ravana and Rama, Sita is depicted in *Asura* as an ordinary individual with a conventional birth, in contrast to the portrayal of her as a divine manifestation emerging from the earth as depicted in *Ramayana*. Various myths recount the birth of Sita with minor variations. Most of them state that King Janaka, who was childless at the time, stumbled upon a box containing an infant while ploughing the land, and that infant was none other than Sita. According to one myth, the goddess Mahalakshmi was born on earth as Vedavati and she committed suicide as she was abused by Ravana during his conquest of Deva kingdoms. Before death, she vowed revenge on Ravana and prophesied that Ravana would be killed by her husband in her next birth. Subsequently, she was reborn as Sita in her next incarnation. According to *Adbhuta Ramayana*, Sita was born to Mandodari as a result of a potion she consumed. *Devi Bhagavata* tells a slightly different story according to which Sita was born as the daughter of Ravana and Mandodari. Fearing a prophecy that Mandodari’s first child will ruin his clan, Ravana buried the child in

a box near Mithila and she was found by King Janaka and he brought her up as Sita (Mani 720-22). Anand Neelakantan rearranges the various myths around Sita in his novel and provides another story exfoliating the supernatural aura.

In *Asura*, Sita is portrayed as the firstborn of Ravana and Mandodari. Once, an astrologer, a friend of Ravana's father, visits his court and a prophecy is made stating that the child will bring misfortune to the Asura race. Following the prophecy, Sita is viewed as a harbinger of bad luck by those around her. Ravana observes a distinct change in the behaviour of those close to him, noting,

From that day onwards, all my family members, the palace servants, my ministers, began to behave in a strange fashion. They showed great reverence and love when my daughter was in my arms or with Mandodari. But I could feel the hatred and fear they felt for her. (Neelakantan 209)

Considering the situation, Ravana was compelled to carry her with him during his conquest of other kingdoms on the mainland because of his apprehension that the child might be subjected to harm by his own people.

During his conquest, Ravana meets Vedavati and he falls in love with her. According to myths, Vedavati is the previous birth of Sita. Ravana meets Vedavati while she is performing penance to get Vishnu as her husband.

Seeing so beautiful a girl engaged in penance, he [Ravana] told her that he was the famous Ravana with ten heads and requested her to throw away the garment of bark of the tree and the matted hair and to accept him as her husband. She rejected his request. The angry Ravana caught hold of her

hand. She resisted using her teeth and finger-nails. She cried out that she wanted no more to retain the body made impure by the touch of a wicked person. She made a fire and jumped into it. Thus in the sight of Ravana, she burnt herself to death. Before death she vowed that in the next birth Mahavishnu would become her husband and would kill Ravana. (Mani 721)

However, Vedavati, in *Asura*, is a Brahmin widow whose husband is killed by the Asura army during their conquest of the Deva kingdom of Mithila. Charmed by her beauty, Ravana attempts to court her. She does not kill herself in the novel; instead, Bhadra is tasked with the responsibility of ending her life, along with that of Ravana's child, by Ravana's ministers during his absence. However, Vedavati is trapped in a fire accident and dies while Bhadra shifts her to get rid of her. She dies cursing Ravana and vowing that she will enter into the body of the princess of Ravana and will ensure the destruction of the entire Asura clan. On the same fateful night, while Bhadra contemplates how to kill Ravana's baby, he trips and falls into an undergrowth and the infant slips from his grasp and falls into a slime-covered ditch. Janaka, the king of Mithila, who was passing through the forest with his hunting party, rescues the baby with a plough, hearing the cry of the baby. Janaka takes her and brings her up as his own daughter and names her Sita meaning 'the one got with a plough' (Neelakantan 230). Thus, Neelakantan interweaves various myths related to Sita's birth and offers a tale that is much more reasonable and rationally plausible.

In *Asura*, the story of Sita's *Agni Pariksha* (test by fire) receives a pragmatic reinterpretation. After Rama's victory over Ravana and the retrieval of Sita, the

Brahmins insist that Sita must undergo an *Agni Pariksha* to confirm her innocence, having been exposed to “the lustful eyes of Ravana and other Asuras” during her abduction. They argued that “the divine fire” “will determine how pure Sita . . . is. If she is chaste and pure, she will remain unscathed. If she is impure, the divine fire will devour her” (463). However, unlike the miraculous survival often depicted in traditional versions due to her purity, Sita’s rescue in the novel is attributed to natural causes. As she leaps into the fire, “the skies opened up and tons of water poured down” (466), extinguishing the flames of the pyre. This timely rainfall saves Sita from the fire, subverting the expected supernatural intervention.

In *Asura*, the demise of Sita is also recounted in a manner that departs from traditional mythology, which typically depicts her as being miraculously swallowed by the earth. In *Ramayana*, when Rama insists on proving her purity in front of the world, Sita asserts: “If I have not thought of anyone other than Raghava [Rama] in my mind, then let the goddess earth open up a chasm for me.” Then miraculously,

[a] divine and excellent throne arose from the middle of the earth. Infinitely valiant serpents held it up on their hoods. It was divine, with a celestial form, and was ornamented with every kind of jewel. The goddess earth was seated on it and engulfed Maithilee [Sita] in her arms. Welcoming and honouring her, he made her sit on that throne. Seated on that throne, without any kind of obstruction, Sita started to enter the earth and a downpour of flowers showered down from the sky. (Debroy Ch. 7 (88))

On the other hand, Anand Neelakantan offers a more plausible explanation devoid of miracles. Facing renewed humiliation and the demand to prove her chastity once

again after reuniting with Rama following years of abandonment, Neelakantan's Sita opts for suicide rather than endure further indignity. As her husband and others expect her to clear an *Agni Pariksha* once again,

Sita performed a quick circumambulation of the raging fire and stood still for a moment. Slowly, she looked at her husband's face. ... Then with a quickness that took everyone by surprise, she ran towards the river, away from the fire, and vanished beyond the edge of the cliff. (Neelakantan 494).

Since no one could find the body of Sita, it was "believed that she had been swallowed by the thick mud at the bottom of Sarayu" (495).

In mythology, Kumbhakarna had been granted the boon of sleep due to his slip of the tongue (Mani 440). Nonetheless, in *Asura*, his abnormal sleeping habit is shown not as a consequence of some divine boon turned curse. But, Kumbhakarna spends most of his time on liquor and drugs and consequently stays unconscious every so often (Neelakantan 150). Moreover, once, as a result of the betrayal of his brother-in-law, he also had to spend a short period imprisoned under Yama, a drug lord. During that time, several drugs were experimented on him and he was in a comatose state when Ravana rescued him from there. Ravana recounts: "The imprisonment in Yama's dungeon had changed him for the worse and he was stoned most of the time. He slept for most of the day and created a ruckus when he woke" (254). Thus, Neelakantan provides a rational explanation for Kumbhakarna's apparently unusual sleeping pattern, thereby invalidating the role of a divine boon that has transformed into a curse.

In *Asura*, Brahma is not a supreme God but rather a family surname. The Brahma family is portrayed as highly skilled in teaching, and, similar to the Shiva family, they are also worshipped by the Asuras because of their virtuous qualities. Brahma, Ravana's Guru (teacher), asserts that they "created the Asura world as we know it today. My family created the law and were worshipped as Gods" (37). According to him, there were four Gurus in the Council of Knowledge. And, when the Deva invasion began, the Brahma family who specialised in arts, crafts and music left for the Gandhara empire and Bali, the Vanara king, protected the Brahma teachers of architecture. The third Brahma family, who specialised in arms and the manufacture of military equipment, chose to live under the protection of Mahabali, the Asura king, and the fourth family of Brahma who specialised in philosophical discourse stayed with Devas. However, according to mythology, Brahma is one of the Trimurtis, who is responsible for creation.

Maricha, the uncle of Ravana, is an important character in *Ramayana* who helps Ravana to abduct Sita. He is portrayed in *Asura* as a noble king who had lost his kingdom. He stands by Ravana in all his good and bad. According to the epic, Maricha transforms into a golden deer and distracts the attention of Rama and Lakshmana while Ravana abducts Sita.

... Maricha assumed the form of a deer and roamed around near the entrance to Rama's hermitage. The tips of his horns had the best of jewels. His face was partly white and partly dark. His mouth was like a red lotus. His ears were like blue lotuses. His neck was elevated and his stomach had the complexion of a blue diamond. His flanks were partly of the hue of madhuka

flowers and partly like filaments of lotuses. His hooves were like lapis lazuli. His body and calves were formed well. The radiant tail was raised up and had the complexion of Indra's weapon. His complexion was pleasant and mild, decorated with many kinds of jewels. In an instant, the rakshasa assumed the form of this extremely beautiful deer. (Debroy, ch. 3 (40))

In *Asura*, however, the transformation of Maricha into a deer is explained in a more logical way. Seeing the golden deer Ravana thinks, "Maricha must have killed a deer and skinned it and was hiding behind it. It was a brilliant and simple camouflage" (Neelakantan 312). Thus, what is presented in myths as magic turns out to be a clever camouflage in the novel.

The first image of Shurpanakha in the novel is that of a small baby lying on her mother's shoulder as "a dirty old rag, tired and hungry." Ravana's love for her is fathomless; he views her as "the most beautiful baby." He, however, admits that when he looks at her through the lens of society, which places immense significance on fairness as a beauty standard, he has to reluctantly agree with his father's opinion that she is "the ugliest creature" his father had ever seen. Ravana is so compassionate towards his sister and he considers her "someone who had been denied everything in life" (198). Her childhood was devoid of happiness and her physical appearance was not according to the beauty standards of the society. She falls in love with Vidyujihva, a rebel who plans to usurp Ravana's throne. She manages to persuade Ravana to let her marry her lover through emotional blackmail. Nevertheless, Ravana subsequently issues an order for Vidyujihva's execution on charges of treason as the latter attempts to seize the throne. Shurpanakha leaves

Lanka after the execution of her husband and leads a life of her choice. She eventually returns to Ravana, deeply humiliated by Lakshmana, who mutilates her by severing her nose and breasts. She recounts the incident to Ravana, asserting that she had innocently inquired whether Sita might consider marrying her brother, the Asura Emperor. Ravana does not swallow her story completely and speculates that Shurpanakha would have approached Rama and Lakshmana lustfully. Shurpanakha is not an embodiment of evil in the novel, but a person who struggled a lot in her life. However, she manipulates circumstances in order to attain her objectives; nonetheless, Neelakantan hints that what Lakshmana did to her was not right in the first place.

Vibhishana is one of the ordinary human characters in *Ramayana*. He is believed to have gained the boon to live as a righteous man; apart from that he does not possess any superhuman abilities in myths. In *Asura* also, he is a normal being, but he is not the celebrated righteous person in the novel. Rather, he is portrayed as a man who deceives his brother and people for personal gain. According to Ravana, Vibhishana has been somewhat of a different character among his siblings since childhood. Ravana considers him to be a bit of a nitwit for lacking restlessness in their pathetic state which was shared by Ravana, Kumbhakarna and Shurpanakha. However, Ravana is well aware that Vibhishana has been the darling of the village since their childhood unlike the other three. Ravana states:

He [Vibhishana] followed whatever was laid down in the books and never asked any questions. There were many times when I felt that Vibhishana was most suited for this society and that he was going to make it big in life. And I

liked him. He was so small and vulnerable and I always felt he needed to be protected from this cruel world. (Neelakantan 23)

According to Ravana, Vibhishana is deeply preoccupied with the pursuit of a morally upright existence, to the extent that he has seemingly lost touch with the art of simply living life. “He gave a moral twist to things and made everyone uneasy” (86). Ravana discloses that he loved Vibhishana “but somehow, his actions were irritating.” As Ravana contends, Vibhishana made others “feel small, as if he was the only son born of virtue” (87).

When Ravana and Kumbhakarna face situations bravely, Vibhishana chooses to escape without any concern for his brothers. Ravana recalls a childhood incident in which Vibhishana had left them as the situation turned dangerous. The siblings decided to steal some milk out of poverty and Ravana and Kumbhakarna were caught by the guards and beaten up. Both Ravana and Kumbhakarna worried so much about their younger brother and they were so anxious about what would have happened to him. Later, it was revealed that Vibhishana had fled the scene, leaving his brothers behind and kept silent about the incident till the morning though he would have asked for help from someone to rescue his brothers (73-39).

Bhadra considers Vibhishana as “the devil incarnate.” Unlike Ravana, according to Bhadra, Vibhishana is not a benevolent individual but an ambitious man who is willing to employ any means to attain his desired objectives. In Bhadra’s opinion, Vibhishana is “passionless and his piety and humility were all pretence. He would not hesitate to kill, maim or serve anyone if it served his purpose” (193). Bhadra recounts:

Initially, Vibhishana was well-liked. His attempts to revamp the forgotten street Shiva temples or those other lesser gods, and his streamlining of temple administration, drew many admirers. But soon, he began to commission small Vishnu temples and introduce strange Deva customs. He even brought some Brahmins and slowly, these people began to introduce the wretched Deva tradition of the caste system. (263-64)

When Ravana steadily earned the goodwill of the people, Vibhishana lost the trust of the Asura people for he began to introduce Deva customs as the superior way of life and supported Brahmins and casteism. Bhadra accuses Vibhishana of leading a secret campaign to reserve all important government jobs for Brahmins. Vibhishana built more and more Vishnu temples in Lanka and Asuras were banned from entering those temples. He also replaced the local priests at the temples with Brahmins. Bhadra refers to Vibhishana as “the disguised Brahmin among the Asuras” (287). In contrast to the myths, Vibhishana in *Asura* is not an embodiment of virtue but he is presented more as a swindler who had cheated his people and siblings for power. On the other hand, Vibhishana in the epic is a virtuous person who rejects his family and people in order to side with goodness and justice. However, as the perspective changes, he becomes more or less a traitor who deceives his own family and clan.

Another prominent mythological character featured in *Asura* is Mahabali. Ravana considers Mahabali “the greatest and mightiest of all Asura kings” (31). As in mythology, Mahabali is presented as an icon of dharma and social justice in the novel too. However, Bhadra, a common man living under Mahabali’s reign,

provides a slightly different picture regarding the greatness of Mahabali. Bhadra views Mahabali as a great ruler not from personal conviction, but because he has been influenced to believe so by others. He reflects:

I believed that Mahabali was invincible. He was thought to be just and tried to rule with his subjects in mind. At least that is what the village elders told us and we had no reason to disbelieve them. We continued to live the same way no matter who ruled in the distant capital. So long as they did not bother us, we would always say they were good rulers. (48)

Bhadra's words showcase that the perspective of the common man often significantly differs from the grand narratives regarding the reign of kings, as these narratives are usually crafted and propagated by the elite or those in power.

Asura provides a rational narrative of how Mahabali was sent into *Patala*, the underworld. According to mythology, Vamana, an incarnation of Mahavishnu, asked Mahabali for three feet of land. As he was granted permission, Vamana grew to a huge size and measured all of the earth with his one foot and heaven with his second foot. Since there was no place to count as the agreed third foot of land, Mahabali willingly requested to set the third foot on his head. Thus, Vamana placed his foot on Mahabali's head and he was thrust down to *Patala* (Mani 104). Anand Neelakantan gives a reasonable and believable alternative to the story of the destruction of Mahabali's empire by Vamana. According to the tale in *Asura*, Mahabali once conducted a *rajasooya* (a ceremony conducted by kings for prosperity) and as part of the ritual, he pledged to fulfil a wish for everyone who asked for it.

It was at that time the Vamana Vishnu, disguised as a poor Brahmin boy, asked for three feet of land to set up a Brahminical learning centre in the Asura capital. Not wanting to go back on his promise, Mahabali gave permission to Deva Brahmins to preach their religion in the Asura capital. Soon, this small centre grew into a massive missionary institution. It became the hot-bed of conspiracy and court intrigue. Finally, before the Asura elite could work out what had hit them, Deva Brahmins had overcome the last Asura empire. Mahabali was banished to the underworld ... (Neelakantan 32)

In the novel, Vamana is not an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, but a Brahmin who deceives Mahabali in disguise. In Neelakantan's version, Vamana neither grows into a gigantic figure nor he measures the earth and the heaven with his foot. Rather he defeats Mahabali through strategic planning and meticulous execution of his plan.

In fact, the novel portrays Vishnu as just another human being who is the Chief of Devas, not as one of the supreme gods as in myths. Ravana states that Vishnu was a "suddenly appeared" God after Devas conquered the Asura civilisation (26). It was Devas who introduced Vishnu as one of the supreme gods who was actually the commander-in-chief of Indra's army.

The later Indra kings were weak and soon became mere puppets in the hands of Vishnu, who was the commander-in-chief of Indra III's army. By the end of Indra XI's reign, the Vishnu clan was virtually ruling the country and the Indra kings became just token monarchs ... Brahma, the original possessor of knowledge, was hailed as the creator; Vishnu as the Preserver of the

system; and ironically Shiva, who built an empire, and not Indra, who destroyed, was hailed as the Destroyer. They were the three Gods of India—the *Trimurti*. (62-63)

Asura, by narrating how Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu began to be worshipped as the *Trimurtis*, maintains that human beings created the notion of gods out of powerful kings and leaders.

According to mythology, Indra is the ruler of the gods known as Devas (Mani 318). In *Asura*, Indra is a warrior who conquered the mighty Asura empire and established the Deva rule in India. In Ravana's opinion, he was a "vicious, ruthless" enemy "with an indomitable will to win" (Neelakantan 53). Ravana states:

Initially, the Devas were just a nuisance to the mighty Asura kings. ...
However, with the advent of Indra, things started to change rapidly. Indra had nothing to lose. Tales of his savagery preceded him. He had ransacked many small kingdoms north-west of the Himalayas and burned beautiful cities. (52)

Thus in *Asura*, Indra is a conqueror who established Deva rule in the Indian subcontinent.

Other minor characters in mythology also undergo the process of demystification, becoming more anthropomorphised in their portrayal in *Asura*. According to myths, Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu were Asura brothers killed by incarnations of Vishnu. Mahavishnu in the form of a pig—*Varahavatara*—killed Hiranyaksha and Hiranyakashipu was killed by *Narasimhavatara* (Mani 81).

According to Neelakantan, Asura emperor Hiranyaksha was killed by a wild boar, not by the incarnation of Vishnu in the form of a boar as it is recounted in myths (Neelakantan 34). The Narasimha *avatar* of Vishnu, who killed Hiranyakashipu, is not a divine incarnation in the novel, but a disguise with a mask of a lion by Vishnu (123). Ravana recounts that “Hiranyakashipu was betrayed by his son Prahlada, who had conspired with Indra, the king of the Devas” (34). In *Ramayana*, Kubera is the God of wealth and the half-brother of Ravana born to Visravas and Daivavarnini (Mani 434). In *Asura*, Kubera is not a God but a human being and the half-brother of Ravana. In the novel, he is an established merchant, and thus, a very rich person. As Ravana observes, Kubera’s business enterprises had offices in every city and he “owned more than 130 ships, which sailed to Greece, Egypt and China” (Neelakantan 22).

Other mythological characters who shed off their supernatural attributes include Varuna, Narada, Parasuram, and Hanuman. Varuna, the god of seas in the myths (Mani 832), is a pirate who rules over the sea in *Asura* (Neelakantan 68). He is portrayed as “a small-time fisherman” who turns out to be “the pirate-King.” According to Ravana, his “cold-heartedness raised him to the league of the Deva Gods” (158). Narada, the God-sage, is presented in the novel as a “travelling mendicant” who is an “inveterate liar” (27). Parasurama, according to Ravana, is a “mad Brahmin” who along with his group of thugs conquered lands and looted people (34) whereas, he is considered the sixth incarnation of the god Vishnu in the myths. Ravana states that “[w]henver Parasurama conquered a land, he ensured that the Brahmins occupied the highest posts. Erstwhile priests like the Malayans or

Vannans, were banished from the cities to the villages” (34). In Ravana’s account, rather than being a divine figure bringing order and justice, Parasurama appears as a figure who marginalises and discriminates against certain social groups, elevating Brahmins and suppressing other communities. Likewise, Hanuman is not a monkey with divine powers in *Asura*, but a human being who belongs to the particular race named “Vanara.” Bali, in *Asura*, is the king of the Vanara race who was “disparagingly called the monkey-King” (236).

In *Asura*, Visravus, the father of Ravana, is a Brahmin whom Ravana views with aversion. Even though he was a famous Maharshi, Ravana or his siblings did not benefit from him. In Ravana’s words, he “wasn’t a bad man, really. He was like any other member of his caste; gloriously self-centred. He considered that we were suitably rewarded with his mere presence in our home. And conveniently forgot that humans need food to live.” Ravana identifies him as a bad father who was “immersed in his own world of learning to care about his progeny” (20). On the day of Ravana’s wedding, amidst the turmoil caused by Ravana’s mistreatment of his own brother and mother, Visravus expresses profound disappointment and condemnation, not just toward Ravana but his entire race. Visravus remarks:

I’m ashamed to say I sired this demon [Ravana]. ... I should not blame him alone. He is after all, an Asura. A more blighted race I have yet to see. Debauchery, sodomy, avarice, you name any evil and this devilish race can easily claim monopoly over it. Black-skinned, ugly creatures. (179)

This statement sheds light on Vishravus' character, revealing a deep-seated bias and propensity to judge an entire race harshly. Hence, the great sage in the myths becomes a racist human in *Asura*.

The story of Jatayu also loses its mysticism in *Asura*. *Ramayana* portrays Jatayu as the “supreme among birds” who had fought against Ravana while he was abducting Sita. Jatayu is the one who narrates to Rama what happened to Sita while he and Lakshmana were away from her. Jatayu, who is mortally injured by Ravana states:

While I looked on, the stronger Ravana abducted her. I tried to rescue Sita and in the encounter, destroyed his chariot and umbrella and also brought Ravana down on the ground here. This is his shattered bow and this is his armour. O Rama! In the encounter, I shattered the chariot that he used to fight. I was exhausted and Ravana severed my wings with his sword. He seized Vaidehi and leapt up into the sky. (Debroy, ch. 3 (63))

In *Asura*, Ravana narrates how an accident occurred during his flight back to Lanka with Sita in the *Pushpaka vimana*.

The journey back was hell. A big bird, a huge vulture, became entangled in the huge fans that propelled *Pushpaka*. It was a terrifying moment. The machine started losing altitude rapidly as the fan stalled and we hurtled downwards like a stone. The earth rushed up to hold us in her deathly embrace. The bird struggled for its life and got even more entangled. (Neelakantan 315)

Contrasting the heroic depiction of Jatayu in mythology as the bird who valiantly attempts to rescue Sita by intercepting Ravana during her abduction, the novel presents the encounter as a mere accident, devoid of any intentional heroism.

Shambuka in *Asura*, as in *Ramayana*, is a young Shudra boy who gets murdered by Rama for learning Vedas. Shambuka learned Vedas and Sanskrit even though learning was prohibited for his caste. He even dares to question the caste system by quoting the same Vedas which are used to segregate society into various castes according to their birth. Shambuka and his Guru consider the Vedas not as “the monopoly of any single caste or profession” but as “a collection of the thoughts of poets who had lived thousands of years ago, who came from varied professions such as fishermen, priests, woodcutters, potters, hunters and many more” (482).

By presenting the mythological superhuman characters as historical figures of antiquity by shredding away their supernatural characteristics, Anand Neelakantan also looks at the nature of the belief system and the concept of God. *Asura* presents the Asura people as not blatantly religious, but they worship gods. Shiva, who is also known as Parameshwara, is their prominent God. For them, Shiva is not a divine being but a great Asura king of antiquity who is later elevated as a God. For Asuras, gods are not divine beings with supernatural capabilities but their ancestors who proved to be good leaders and worth following. However, with the arrival of Devas, a drastic change was brought to their belief system. Ravana, narrating the history of the Asura race, provides a vivid picture of how Devas, who conquered the Asura Empire, began to take over the gods of native Asuras and project themselves as gods. Through cultural assimilation, Devas started to worship

Shiva and Brahma and accepted them as their gods. In Ravana's words, "[t]hey stole the great Asura God, Shiva. Brahma, the teacher, also became their god" (26). Later Devas "began ascribing divinity to their own leaders. And soon, the ruling class started calling themselves Gods. These Gods multiplied to thousand and then to lakhs" (27).

According to Ravana, Devas claimed themselves to be gods and people were forced to worship them out of fear rather than respect. A parallel line could be drawn along the deification of Shiva and other Devas with the deification of Uranus and Zeus as it is described by Euhemerus. Like Uranus, Shiva, according to Neelakantan, was deified after his death by his people. However, Zeus was deified while he was alive and mythographers hold two versions of how it was done.

According to Eusebius, Zeus's deification followed a bottom-up sequence: he is seen as traveling to various places of the known world and encountering local potentates, who either accept him or face him in battle, only to be eventually defeated by the powerful king. Lactantius, on the other hand, informs us that the process involved a top-down sequence, with Zeus setting up shrines dedicated to himself by conceptualizing and executing a cunning plan. (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 25)

The deification of Devas in *Asura*, up to a great extent, resembles the exaltation of Zeus described by Lactantius: Devas proclaim themselves divine by forcing the people to worship them. However, the deification of Rama is a lot similar to the way how Zeus was exalted according to Eusebius. Rama steadfastly gained the respect of

people by propagating stories of his superiority and encountering and bonding with various local kings such as Bali.

Ravana observes that people have a tendency to idolise those who set examples before them and this can be manipulated effortlessly. He notices that his people have begun to ascribe a kind of divinity to him after he had set out to conquer the Deva kingdoms. However, Bhadra describes Ravana as “too humane to be a God” considering the fact that Ravana did not hesitate to take in Mandodari though she was assaulted and humiliated by the Deva army. Whereas, Rama was willing to abandon his wife based on mere suspicion and yet, he is worshipped as the incarnation of the God. Considering Vanaras’ belief that Rama is an *avatar* of the God, Ravana contemplates:

That is a good piece of propaganda, I admit. Claim that God is with you, or better, you are God, then anything you do, any adharma you commit, becomes divine play. ... Making your wife suffer exile in the forest, killing a friendly king through deceit, sending terrorists to cities and annihilating innocent men, women and children ... were these the marks of divinity?

(372)

Ravana points out that Rama was just another human being who was deified as part of political propaganda. Ravana also highlights another prospect of deification.

According to him,

... as is the nature of the world, the good deeds of the victor would be exaggerated and the bad deeds obliterated from memory. And the doings of

the victor could not be justified by the prevailing moral codes of society, he would be elevated to godhood, for who could question a God? In this way, my country produced many Gods. Every person who had won by whatever means, had become a God or *avatar*. For the vanquished, it would always be the other way round. (433)

Considering the possibility of utilising deification as a political tool, Roubekas also observes that “[i]f kingship is the result of one man and his siblings who concocted the ways to exercise and maintain power, their deification was subsequently originated from such crafty manipulations” (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 106). Hence, when Anand Neelakantan retells *Ramayana*, it becomes the story of not Rama, but Ravana. Moreover, he presents the story of Ravana as the story of aboriginal Indians establishing an association between the Deva-Asura conflicts with Arya-Dravida conflicts.

The Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* reimagine mythological characters as historical figures and interpret their stories in a plausible historical way. These novels attempt to provide seemingly believable narratives regarding the mythological characters of Shiva, Sati, Rama, Sita, Ravana, and Krishna and thereby try to validate their existence in history. However, although all the select works portray mythological characters as historical figures, each of them adopts different approaches to do so. When *Asura* portrays mythological characters as human beings with no supernatural powers or attributes, the Shiva Trilogy depicts Shiva as a mortal who experiences divine interventions in his life. In *Krishna Key*, Krishna is a

historical being but an incarnation of God as well. Consequently, the select novels vary in their approach towards historicizing their characters.

The Shiva Trilogy undertakes a historical interpretation of the myth of Shiva and portrays him as a human being who is deified because of his valour and good deeds. Shiva in the trilogy is a hero who later transforms into a God in the minds of the people. Shiva's journey towards apotheosis could be recognised through Campbell's interpretation of the hero's journey. According to Campbell, the hero's journey involves a series of stages, including the separation (or departure), the initiation, and the return (42). In the case of Shiva in the trilogy, these stages can be seen as he transitions from an ordinary being to an extraordinary figure endowed with divine attributes. This transformation aligns with Campbell's idea of the hero undergoing significant trials and gaining wisdom, ultimately leading to their apotheosis, or elevation to a god-like status.

According to Campbell, the "first stage of the mythological journey—which ... [is] designated the 'call to adventure'—signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown" (72). In the context of Shiva's journey, this stage is represented by his migration to Meluha, a land that symbolises an unfamiliar and perfect society. This move marks the beginning of Shiva's transformation and sets the stage for his elevated status. By leaving his familiar surroundings and entering Meluha, Shiva steps into the unknown, embracing the call to adventure that leads him toward his destiny and the eventful realisation of his true potential.

The hero-journey encounters a “protective figure,” “who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass” (Campbell 81). The protective figure, often, will be a supernatural being in “masculine form.” He will provide “advice that the hero will require” and the “higher mythologies develop the role in the great figure of the guide, the teacher, the ferryman, the conductor of souls to the after world” (84). Shiva encounters such a supernatural aid in the form of Vasudev Pandits. Vasudev Pandits or the tribe of Vasudev is a clan left behind by Vishnu with a two-fold mission: firstly to aid the next Mahadev and secondly to become the next Vishnu when it is required (Tripathi, *Meluha* 398). The tribe of Vayuputra, a clan destined to support future Vishnu and from whom the next Mahadva emerges, also plays a crucial role in helping Shiva in his quest to prevent the greatest evil from devastating the earth. Shiva’s blue throat also serves as a supernatural element that significantly aids him in his quest. It becomes a crucial symbol through which the people recognise him as their leader and saviour, interpreting the blue throat as a divine indicator.

In the initiation phase, the hero “must survive a succession of trials” (Campbell 113). Shiva endures a series of formidable challenges throughout his journey. One of his significant tasks is winning the love of Sati, a pursuit fraught with emotional and social obstacles. Shiva’s union with Sati results not only in the hero’s personal fulfilment but also in significant societal transformation. He challenges and ultimately reforms the oppressive Vikarma system, which marginalises individuals based on their *karma* (actions) in previous births. He also

faces numerous challenges in identifying the greatest evil of his time and removing it from usage. According to Campbell, when the hero:

arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition by the father-creator (father atonement), his won divinization (apotheosis), or again—if the powers have remained unfriendly to him—his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft) ... (263)

Instead of experiencing a sacred marriage (since Sati is depicted as a human rather than a Goddess) and father atonement, Amish Tripathi's Shiva undergoes apotheosis. Considering his valour and benevolence, people begin to identify and worship him as their saviour and God. Tripathi's Shiva also goes through the third phase of the hero-journey, called "return," after he accomplishes his mission as the hero. After removing the greatest evil from usage, Shiva returns to his homeland, Mount Kailash. There he adopts the life of an ascetic, contributing "many fresh thoughts and philosophies to the immense body of ancient Indian knowledge and wisdom (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 563). Thus Shiva completes the hero-journey by returning transfigured and sharing his wisdom with the world.

On the other hand, Ashwin Sanghi does not present Krishna as an ordinary person but as an incarnation of the God. Consequently, although Sanghi embarks on a historical interpretation of mythology by attempting to portray the mythological events related to Krishna as historical facts, Sanghi rejects Euhemerus' view that the divinity of mythological characters is merely the result of exaggeration. Krishna is

not a typical “hero” who undergoes a journey of deification through a quest, nor does he receive supernatural guidance to accomplish his mission and subsequent elevation to godhood. Instead, he is born as a divine entity, endowed with supernatural abilities from the outset. Throughout his life, Krishna continually demonstrates his divinity by performing various superhuman feats and miraculous acts. These displays of divine power and wisdom serve to establish and reinforce his status as a God. As Bassuk points out, Krishna in *Krishna Key*, the incarnation or the god-man, has “all the power and capacity of God, and share a portion that omnipotence” with humankind (2). This portrayal highlights a different path to divinity, one that is innate rather than acquired through a transformative journey. However, by placing Krishna within the historical time frame of the Vedic civilisation, Sanghi portrays him as a historical figure.

In the portrayal of mythological characters, *Asura* takes up a clear euhemeristic approach and presents the characters as normal human beings who get deified or demonised later in their lives. Anand Neelakantan narrates, how Rama is revered as a God and how Ravana is demonised through exaggerations. In *Asura*, neither Rama nor Ravana possesses divine powers or supernatural features. Unlike in the Shiva Trilogy, they do not come across some divine interventions in their lives. Rather, the lives of Rama, Ravana and Sita are determined by their own decisions and actions.

Though by “claiming that the traditional deities were mere humans, Euhemerus apparently denied their divine nature not merely their anthropomorphic descriptions” (Roubekas, *Ancient Theory* 26), historical interpretation of mythology

operates differently in the twenty-first century mythological fictions. In these narratives, approaching myths historically and subsequently anthropomorphising mythological figures attribute a form of historical validity to them rather than denying their divine attributes. Unlike Anand Neelakantan, both Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi suggest that human beings hailed as gods might have indeed possessed divine or superhuman capabilities or divine interventions. Sanghi, for instance postulates that Krishna was a divine incarnation in anthropomorphic form, while Tripathi maintains that mystical elements in Shiva's story refer to human abilities that have been lost over time.

These differing approaches underscore a significant aspect of the interpretation of myths in mythological fictions in the twenty-first century: the intertwining of the divine and the historical. By presenting mythological figures as relatable characters with human traits, the select novels transform the myths more believable, grounded in reality thereby leading them to be perceived as historical accounts rather than purely mythical tales. Thus, in these fictional accounts, myths get converted into the realm of history rather than being imaginary stories.

Chapter 4

Myth and Science: Rationalising Mythology

Myth is often regarded as a form of ‘primitive’ science or the pre-scientific counterpart to modern science (Segal 13). Myth has been subjected to criticism with the rise of modern science. Unlike science, which tries to explain the natural world through observation, experimentation and verifiable data, myths are rooted in symbolic narratives, supernatural elements and metaphorical interpretations. This lack of empirical validation and rational methodology has led to the view that myths are outdated in an age of science. However, myths in the modern world, as Robert A. Segal argues, “reconcile” with modern science where “elements at odds with modern science are either removed or, more cleverly, reinterpreted as in fact modern and scientific” (12). In order to co-exist with the dominant framework of modern science, myths either discard elements that directly conflict with scientific understanding or reinterpret these elements to align with contemporary scientific notions. This ongoing trend of reinterpreting myth in alignment with science or as science is also a central feature of mythological fictions in the new millennium. Amish Tripathi follows such a pattern in the Shiva Trilogy while he reinterprets mythological events using scientific terminology. The trilogy incorporates scientific jargon into its narrative, utilising it as a tool to rationalise and recontextualise traditional myths.

Brahaspati, the guru (teacher) of the Devas (gods) in Indian mythology, becomes the chief scientist of the Meluhan empire in the Shiva Trilogy. By shifting Brahaspati’s role from a spiritual advisor to a scientific persona, Tripathi modernises

the character, making him more relatable to a contemporary audience. This shift also helps situate the mythological character within a more rational and empirically grounded context. The use of the term “chief scientist” invokes a sense of scientific authority and expertise immediately, suggesting that Brahaspati’s knowledge and skills are rooted in scientific principles rather than mystical powers. This not only enhances the believability of the character but also subtly suggests that the miraculous feats and divine interventions commonly depicted in myths can be understood through the lens of science.

In the trilogy, Brahaspati is a rational being who, initially, hesitates to believe in the legend of Neelkanth. In his view, science “provides a solution and a rationale for everything. And if there is anything that appears like a miracle, the only explanation is that a scientific reason for it has not been discovered as yet” (Tripathi, *Meluha* 142). However, after meeting Shiva, he opines that “[s]ometimes one needs a little bit of faith when faced with difficult situation. Reason doesn’t always work. We may also need miracle” (198). Brahaspati’s journey from scepticism to a nuanced acceptance of faith suggests a reconciliation of science with spirituality. His character arc indicates that while science is a powerful tool for understanding the world, it is not infallible or all-encompassing. Even though he is a scientist, Brahaspati believes in the Vikarma system and advises Shiva to get *shudhikaran* (purification process) as the latter touches a blind man—a Vikarma (201). Brahaspati never questions the validity of the superstitious practice of Vikarma and chooses to believe whatever the people agree with. In a way, he succumbs to social conformity rather than rationality. Thus, in the Shiva Trilogy, Brahaspati emerges as a character

embodying the synthesis of science and faith. Through Brahaspati, Tripathi explores the idea that rationality and faith are not mutually exclusive but can coexist. This integration of scientific rationality with divinity underscores Tripathi's broader attempt to rationalise mythology. It lays emphasis on how mythological narratives can be interpreted through a scientific lens without stripping them of their mystical and cultural significance.

Brahma, one of the *Trimurtis*, is also presented in the Shiva Trilogy as “one of the greatest Indian scientists” who invented Somras and who is revered as a god after his death. Traditionally, Brahma is worshipped as the creator god among the Hindu *Trimurti*, embodying divine creativity and cosmic order. By reimagining Brahma as a preeminent scientist who invented Somras—a substance which has mystical properties—Tripathi aligns divine creation with human ingenuity, thereby rationalising mythology in terms of scientific achievement. This recharacterisation suggests that acts of creation and innovation—typically attributed to divine intervention—can also be viewed as the pinnacle of human intellectual and creative efforts. Divine boons and miracles in myths are unexplained phenomena that signify the god's omnipotence. However, by attributing the creation of Somras to Brahma's scientific prowess, Tripathi offers a rational explanation for what might otherwise be considered supernatural. This approach, along with demystifying the divine, legitimises the myths as repositories of sophisticated knowledge.

In the Shiva Trilogy, Somras is depicted as a groundbreaking scientific discovery by ancient scientists, resembling the concept of an elixir with remarkable healing powers and the ability to significantly slow down the ageing process.

Brahaspati elucidates the functioning of Somras using scientific principles that were discovered much later in human history. For instance, he discusses the process of cellular respiration, a concept that was formally understood in the twentieth century, and the role of oxygen, which was identified as a chemical element in the fifteenth century. Brahaspati explains the working of Somras to Shiva:

When oxygen reacts with our food in order to release energy, it also releases free radicals called oxidants. These oxidants are toxic. ... which starts reacting inside us. We rust from the inside and hence age and eventually die. ... Somras, which when consumed, reacts with the oxidants, absorbs them and then expels them from the body as sweat or urine. Because of the Somras, there are no oxidants left in the body. (Tripathi, *Meluha* 136-37)

By attributing scientific explanations to a mythical phenomenon, Tripathi demystifies the divine and situates the extraordinary within the realm of human comprehension. Brahaspati uses modern scientific terms like “oxidants” and “free radicals,” which are concepts from contemporary biochemistry. Through the detailed description, using scientific terms and concepts, Tripathi elucidates the possibilities of Somras or elixir being a historical, human-made reality.

Somras is presented as the secret of Meluhans’ longevity who live more than hundreds of years. Daksha, the Meluhan king, explains that it is reality made possible by the “brilliance of ... scientists who make ... Somras.” According to him, Somras postpones “death considerably” and assists in living youthful for ages (83). *Amrit/amrut* or *amrtam* is the elixir according to Hindu mythology, which makes someone deathless. Though *amrit* is a divine object according to myths, which was

obtained by churning the sea of milk (Mani 31), in the Shiva Trilogy, it turns out to be a scientific discovery by the Vedic people. By presenting Somras as the mythical *amrit*, Tripathi suggests that ancient people enjoyed prolonged life and vitality due to their advanced scientific wisdom. Somras is also attributed to have supernatural healing capacities like a divine medicine. When Shiva is administered Somras for the first time, he undergoes strange feelings and his dislocated shoulder bone re-engineers itself to be healed. His battle wounds are cured, scars vanish and his broken toe is repaired (Tripathi, *Meluha* 18-19). By using scientific terminology and grounding the mythical substance Somras in biological reality, Tripathi adds a layer of rationality to his fictional world. The portrayal of the elixir as a historical reality elevates the ancient people, depicting them as possessing superior scientific knowledge and achievement compared to modern times.

Somras, however, is not a flawless substance. Instead, it is depicted as a complex substance, a result of scientific discovery, with significant side effects. Many years after the invention of Somras, its adverse effects have been identified, which include the birth of Nagas—individuals with distinctive physical abnormalities—and a reduced fertility rate among the populace. The toxic waste produced during the production of Somras also affects humanity adversely. Brahaspati states:

The Somras is not only difficult to manufacture, but it also generates large amounts of toxic waste. A problem we have never truly tackled. It cannot be disposed of on land because it can poison an entire district through groundwater contamination. It cannot be discharged into the sea. The Somras

waste reacts with salt water to disintegrate in a dangerously rapid and explosive manner. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 18-19)

The plague in Branga is identified as a result of consuming water contaminated by Somras waste. The portrayal of Somras as a substance with negative side effects serves to anthropomorphise and rationalise the concept of the elixir, moving it from the realm of divine miracles to a product of human ingenuity and fallibility. Unlike a divine substance, which would presumably be perfect and flawless, Somras is portrayed as a product of human invention, and therefore, subject to imperfections.

Instead of narrating the blue throat of Shiva as a mysterious event, Amish Tripathi provides a seemingly scientific explanation for it. According to the trilogy, Shiva's throat turns blue in colour because of a particular medicine.

... [Vayuputras] administer some medicine to the candidate [of the next Mahadev] as he enters adolescence. The effect of this medicine remains dormant in his throat for years till it manifests itself on his drinking the Somras at a specific age. ... Somras reacts with the traces of the medicine already present in the man's throat to make his neck appear blue. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 104)

Hence, in the trilogy, the blue throat of Shiva is not a miraculous appearance, but rather a planned procedure using experimented medicines. Tripathi reinterprets the mythical blue throat of Shiva in his narratives in a way that aligns with scientific reasoning. In myths, Shiva's blue throat is a symbol of his divine intervention during the churning of the ocean (*Samudra Manthan*), where he agrees to consume the

deadly poison Halahala to save the world. This act is often viewed as a testament to Shiva's divine nature. However, in the Shiva Trilogy, Tripathi transforms this mystical, courageous action into a more plausible scenario involving a medicinal reaction. The scientific rationale presented in the trilogy demystifies Shiva's divine attribute, portraying him as a human who experiences an unusual but explainable reaction to a particular medicine. Through this reinterpretation of Shiva's blue throat, Tripathi implies ancient people's sophisticated medical knowledge as well.

Emphasising the superior medical knowledge of the ancient people, the Shiva Trilogy posits that great sages of that period were equipped with magical medicines more potent than the Somras. Maharshi (sage) Bhrigu offers Dilipa, the king of Swadeep, a rare kind of medicine which helps him recover from his diseases and old age. Observing the positive changes in Dilipa's physical condition, his son Bhagirath speculates that someone like a Maharshi is "supplying him with superior medicines" which are much more powerful than the Somras. Conversing with Shiva, Bhagirath states: "Had you seen my father a few years back, you would have thought he was but a small step away from the cremation pyre. A life of debauchery and drink had wreaked havoc within his body. But today, he looks younger than I have ever known" (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 64). Sati also asserts that Bhrigu's "spiritual and *scientific* powers are legendary" [emphasis added] (128). Hence, Tripathi proposes that ancient sages like Bhrigu were sources of superior scientific wisdom having the capability of producing medicine powerful enough to bring back individuals from their deathbeds. Tripathi accentuates that Bhrigu had used *medicine*, not some divine mantras to heal Dilipa. The emphasis on medical

knowledge over divine intervention assists the rationalisation of mythological narratives. Tripathi's portrayal of ancient sages as reservoirs of medical knowledge serves to elevate these figures above their contemporary counterparts, suggesting a level of sophistication and wisdom that surpasses modern medicine. Through the portrayal of Bhrigu, Tripathi suggests that the ancient sages were not just mystical or religious figures, rather they were pioneering scientists as well. It also implies that contemporary medicine, despite its advancement, may still lack the holistic and profound understanding that ancient sages possessed.

In addition to the example of Bhrigu, Tripathi portrays Meluhans in general as highly advanced in medical science encompassing specialised medical fields such as brain surgery and cosmetic surgery. When Sati's face is burned in the battle at Devagiri, Ayurvati, the chief doctor, promises Sati to perform "a cosmetic surgery to smoothen [her] skin" (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 338). Likewise, when Parvateshwar suffers from an internal haemorrhage, Ayurvati recommends brain surgery which suggests a deep understanding of human anatomy and medical procedures (Tripathi, *Nagas* 82). Furthermore, Ayurvati is shown using an oxygen-supporting machine during the treatment of Parvateshwar (84), indicating the availability and utilisation of medical devices that support critical care. However, Parvateshwar's haemorrhage is cured not through surgery, but by applying a "reddish-brown thick paste" made from the bark of the Sanjeevani tree on his temple and nostrils (87). This treatment highlights the blend of mythical elements with medical science, as Sanjeevani is a legendary herb in mythology known for its miraculous healing powers. Thus, by portraying a herbal medicine potent enough to cure brain haemorrhage, Tripathi

underscores the pre-eminence of ancient medical practices—rooted in nature and myth—over modern methods.

The Shiva Trilogy portrays ancient Indians as well-versed in cell theory as well. Conversing about the working of Somras, Brahaspati states: “Our body is made up of millions of tiny living units called cells. These are the building blocks of life” (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 15). He elaborates on the nature of cells with which the human body is made up and also refers to mitosis. In Brahaspati’s words, “cells have the ability to divide and grow. And each division is like a fresh birth; one old unhealthy cell magically transforms into two new healthy cells. As long as they keep dividing, they remain healthy” (15). However, in the history of modern science, the cell was first discovered by the English scientist Robert Hooke in 1665 and the Cell Theory, which proposes that all living organisms are made of basic units called cells, was first proposed by German scientists Theodor Schwann and Matthias Jakob Schleiden in 1838 (Alberts).

Brahaspati identifies the physical deformities of Nagas are caused due to the uncontrolled division of cells. Though basic knowledge about cancer existed among people since 3000 BC, the cause and cure were not found at that time. It was only in 1838, the German pathologist Johannes Muller diagnosed that cancer is caused by uncontrollable division of human cells. Howard W. Haggard and G. M. Smith opine that Muller’s 1838 work “was not only the foundation for cellular pathology, but was also, and more specifically, the foundation for the modern conception of the nature of cancerous growths” (419). Nevertheless, according to Amish Tripathi, the ancient Indians were aware of the cause of cancer much before that. In the trilogy,

Brahapati proposes that, though the continued division of cells is regulated in most people, “in a few, some cells lose control over their division process and keep growing at an exponential pace” which results in cancer (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 16). Recognising the condition of Nagas as a case of cancer, Brahaspati states: “This cancer can sometimes lead to a painful death. But there are times when these cells continue to grow and appear as deformities—like extra arms or very long nose” (16). By attributing the superhuman physiognomies of mythological characters to a medical condition, Tripathi offers a scientific rationale for their supernatural features. For instance, the elephant head of Ganesh and the ten-headed Ravana, traditionally viewed as divine and mystical attributes, are reinterpreted in the trilogy through the lens of genetic mutations and medical anomalies.

Tripathi presents the scientists in Meluha as adept in the science of light and vision as well. They knew white light is a confluence of seven different colours and how things became visible when light falls on them and reflects back (Tripathi, *Meluha* 298). According to modern science, Isaac Newton (1642-1727) “was the first [person] to show that the colour is the property of light and not of the medium. Through ingenious experiments he could show that the light generated by sun consisted of all the colours” (Zubairy 11).

According to Tripathi, ancient people were also familiar with the existence of microorganisms such as bacteria. Brahaspati claims that he had experimented with a specific bacterium to convert the Saraswati River much less potent in the production of the Somras (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 43). However, the presence of bacteria was first discovered in the seventeenth century by Antonie van Leewenhoek

(Ameyes 30). By depicting ancient characters who use modern scientific terminology and concepts, Tripathi implies that ancient civilisations may have possessed scientific insights that are now being rediscovered or acknowledged in modern times.

It is believed that sages of ancient times possessed magical powers such as mind reading and telepathy. Tripathi tries to provide a scientific explanation for these seemingly magical abilities by relying on the science of radio waves. The Pandit at Kashi Viswanath temple elaborates on the capacity to communicate nonverbally through thoughts. According to him, though human beings generally depend on sound waves for hearing, radio waves can also be used for auditory assistance. If one succeeds in training his or her brain to pick up radio waves, then they will be able to communicate without uttering words.

It takes effort to be able to even transmit your thoughts clearly as radio waves. Many people do it unconsciously, even without training. But picking up radio waves and hearing other people's thoughts? That is completely different. It is not easy. We have to stay within the range of powerful transmitters. ... the temples work as our transmitters. Therefore, the temples we use have a height of at least fifty metres. (Tripathi, *Nagas* 105)

Temples, thus, acquire more significance in the Shiva Trilogy as they are depicted as scientifically important spaces along with their affiliation with gods and divinity. Within the premises of temples, Shiva converses with the Vasudev Pandits through thoughts without using words. The concept of temples as transmitters further elevates ancient architectural and religious structures, attributing to them a

sophisticated technological function that aligns with modern communication concepts.

Gopal asserts that great sages like Bhrigu can read others' minds without the help of any transmitters.

They do not need to wait till our thoughts are converted into radio waves, to be able to detect them. They can read our thoughts even as we formulate them. ... Thoughts are nothing but electrical impulses in our brain. ... These impulses make the pupils of our eyes move minutely. A trained person, like a maharshi, can decipher this movement in our pupils and read our thoughts.

(Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 167)

Gopal describes thoughts as electrical impulses in the brain, a concept grounded in scientific knowledge of neural activity. Tripathi's explanation places the miraculous ability to read minds within a framework of advanced observational skills and a deep understanding of physiological responses. It suggests that what appears divine and supernatural might be rooted in the mastery of human biology and perception. The supernatural ability to read another person's mind, hence, gets a seemingly scientific explanation using terms like radio waves and transmitters. Thus, Tripathi's depiction of telepathy reinforces the narrative's effort to validate ancient myths through scientific principles, suggesting that ancient people possessed advanced knowledge that contemporary society is only beginning to appreciate.

Tripathi portrays the ancient people as sophisticated engineers capable of constructing dams and gates across broad rivers. According to Tripathi, Branga

engineers built a massive iron barrier across the river Ganga that also worked as a trap against enemies.

The barrier's base was a cage built of iron, which allowed the waters of the mighty Ganga to flow through, but prevented any person or large fish from swimming through underwater. The barrier had ... five open spaces in between, to allow five ships to sail through simultaneously. ... At the beginning of the opening was a deep pool of water with a base made of water-proofed teak, into which the ship had sailed in. There was a cleverly designed pump system that allowed the waters of the Ganga to come into the pool. This raised the ship to the correct height. (Tripathi, *Nagas* 156)

By portraying such advanced engineering feats, Tripathi elevates the ancient people, depicting them as possessing a level of scientific and technological knowledge that rivals and surpasses modern achievements.

Although nuclear fission experiments began only in the 1930s, Tripathi proposes that ancient Indians were well-versed in atomic theories including fission and fusion. According to him, weapons such as the "Brahmastra" or "Pashupatiastra," mentioned in myths, are actually nuclear weapons.

The *Brahmastra* is the weapon of absolute destruction, ... When fired on some terrain, a giant mushroom cloud will rise, high enough to touch the heavens. Everyone and everything in the targeted place would be instantly vaporised. Beyond this inner circle of destruction will be those who are unfortunate enough to survive, for they will suffer for generations. The water

in the land will be poisoned for decades. The land will be unusable for centuries; no crops will grow on it. This weapon doesn't just kill once; it kills again and again, for centuries after it has been used. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 343)

The imagery of the massive mushroom cloud created upon the deployment of Brahmastra parallels the iconic visual of the nuclear explosions, where the detonation produces a towering mushroom-shaped cloud. Describing the dangers of using Brahmastra, Mithra, the chief of the Vayuputras states:

... [Brahmastra] is too uncontrollable. It destroys anything and everything. Most importantly, its effect spread out in circles. The worst destruction is in the epicentre, where everything living is instantly incinerated into thin air. While there is less destruction in the outer circles, the damage is still significantly widespread in the vicinity. So even if those outside the primary impact zone are not immediately killed, they suffer from the immense radiation unleashed by the *astras*. (401)

The immediate impact of the Brahmastra is described in terms of total annihilation. Everything in the targeted area is instantly vapourised, leaving no trace behind. This level of destruction mirrors the immediate effects of a nuclear bomb, where the epicentre of the blast experiences intense heat and pressure, obliterating everything in its vicinity. Moreover, it is stated that Brahmastra is capable of emitting radiation which will affect the people even after the explosion. It is also stated that in order to safeguard themselves from the radiation emitted by the Pashupatiastra materials, strict measures are taken by the Vayuputras while handling them. They put the

materials in a heavy trunk that has “massive insulation, made of lead and wet clay, besides the leaves of imported bilva trees” to protect them from “exposure to the *Pashupatiasra* radiation” (405).

According to modern science, it was Sir William Crookes, in 1879, who first discovered radiation which he then had called “radiant matter.” Later, in 1895, Wilhelm Rontgen discovered the X-ray (Gale and Lax 38). Radioactivity was discovered further later in 1896 by Henri Becquerel (40). Helge Kragh opines:

When Henri Becquerel announced his discovery of uranium on March 1, 1896, the new phenomenon was considered interesting, ... Only when Pierre and Marie Curie isolated radium two years later did radioactivity (as it now began to be called) become a hot topic for research among physicist and chemists. (332)

According to Robert Peter Gale and Eric Lax, the “nineteenth-century pioneers of radiation science were at first unaware of radiation’s inherent danger or benefit” (38). It was in 1919, Rutherford successfully conducted the first artificial nuclear reaction (Gale and Lax 44). However, Amish Tripathi’s characters are portrayed as having knowledge of radiation, radioactive materials and the safety measures necessary for handling them, even in ancient times.

Tripathi differentiates *Pashupatiasra* from *Brahmastra* in terms of nuclear fusion and nuclear fission. Nuclear fusion is a more controlled nuclear reaction which limits destruction to a more specific area than nuclear fission weapons. It is

the technology employed in hydrogen bombs. Introducing the Pashupatiasra to Shiva, Mithra states:

It is a weapon designed by Lord Rudra. It has all the power of the *Brahmastra*, but with much greater control. Its destruction is concentrated in the inner circle. Life outside this zone is not impacted at all. In fact, with Pashupatiasra, you can even focus the effect in only one direction, leaving everyone else in the other directions safe. ... It will poison the area for centuries. The devastation is unimaginable. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 402)

Pashupatiasra is specifically mentioned as a nuclear fusion weapon, unlike *Brahmastra* and *Vaishnavasra* which are presented as nuclear fission weapons. The processes of nuclear fusion and fission are also described in the trilogy.

In a pure nuclear fusion weapon, two paramanoos, the smallest stable division of matter, are fused together to release tremendous destructive energy. In a nuclear fission weapon, anoos, atomic particles, are broken down to release paramanoos and this is also accompanied by a demonic release of devastating energy. (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 541)

By depicting mythological *Brahmastra* and *Pashupatiasra* as equivalent to modern nuclear weapons, it is implied that ancient civilisations possessed a profound understanding of these nuclear processes, long before modern science discovered them. Yet modern science maintains that nuclear fission was first discovered only in 1938 and its discovery was announced the next year. And the “first man-made demonstration of a self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction was accomplished by

Fermi and others only in 1942” (Gale and Lax 46). Following the announcement of the discovery of nuclear fission, efforts to develop a nuclear bomb commenced in various parts of the world. “On August 6, 1945, six and a half years after the announcement of the discovery of fission ... ‘Little Boy,’ the first ever atomic bomb, was exploded over Hiroshima” (47).

Though Amish Tripathi presents Brahmastra and Pashupatiastra as nuclear weapons, he does not completely reject the mythical belief that they are divine in nature. He presents them as scientific discoveries which make use of divine supplication. Tripathi emphasises that the execution of the astra depends on mantras and rituals along with engineering constructions. In Gopal’s words, “[t]here is a combination of engineering constructions, mantras and other preparations that ... have to follow in order to set up” the astras (Tripathi, *Vayuputras* 406). By showing that these powerful weapons required spiritual rituals for their preparation, Tripathi underscores the idea that there might be elements of ancient wisdom that cannot be explained through modern scientific jargon.

According to M. Jayabharati, “[t]he *Krishna Key* states and glorifies the technological supremacy of Indus valley civilization” (21). Unlike the Shiva Trilogy, the major events in *Krishna Key* occur in the modern world. Thus, apart from providing the story of Krishna and *Mahabharata* in the first person narrative of Krishna, *Krishna Key* does not portray any mythological characters in detail. The characters in *Krishna Key* are not just common people but highly educated people who live in the twenty-first century. Ravi Mohan Saini is a professor and historian, Anil Varshney is a linguist, symbolist and archaeologist, Priya is a doctoral student,

and Kurkude and Devendra Chhedi are well-known scientists. Consequently, their opinions and arguments achieve greater significance possessing a kind of scientific aura. Hence, in *Krishna Key*, the rationalisation of mythology is done using seemingly scientific voices and by consciously neglecting contradictory arguments. *Krishna Key* presents a group of characters who believe in the historicity of Krishna and attempt to rationalise the story of Krishna by reinterpreting mythical events and allusions. All the major characters in *Krishna Key*, including Saini and Priya, believe in the superiority of ancient Indians in terms of science and technology. They try to establish the supremacy of Vedic civilisation and claim that India had a great past that even surpasses the glory of the modern age. More importantly, the characters in the novel try to demonstrate the supremacy of the ancient Vedic period in a seemingly scientific and rational way.

Ravi Mohan Saini argues that the ancient people of India knew more about energy and matter than modern scientists. He claims, as it is portrayed in the Shiva Trilogy, that the ancient people knew white light could be split into seven constituent colours and these constituent colours, put together can create white light. According to Saini, ancient Indians also proposed the existence of seven sacred *chakras* in the human body which could be considered coils of energy. Saini hypothesises that the seven notes of melody correspond to the seven *chakras* in the human body and *chakras* get activated in response to the matching frequency of the notes of the melody. In his opinion, the seven notes of melody combine to form the “universal sound” *om* just as seven colours combine to form white light and that is why the sound *om* is used while meditating to activate the energy *chakras*. Saini also

tries to demonstrate that the ancient people of India had knowledge of nuclear energy through the unscientific notion of *chakras* and an over-emphasis on the number seven. He continues,

Modern scientists now believe that there are seven broad forms of energy—mechanical, heat, chemical, radiant, electrical, sound, and nuclear. It is my reasoned guess that the ancient yogis knew this. They also knew that each of these could be broken into seven constituent elements! ... Even their most important and most exalted river—the Sarasvati—was part of the Saptasindhu, *the seven rivers*. Vedic knowledge was derived from the Saptarshi—*the seven sages*. Even Dwaraka was the embodiment of Saptadweep—*the seven islands*. The Vedic calendar was based on the *seven*-day phase of the moon! ... What if the meditation that they practised on the banks of the Sarasvati was simply an ancient technique to concentrate multiple energy forms into one? (Sanghi 126-27)

Saini interprets mythological narratives symbolically, in a manner that aligns with contemporary scientific principles. He leverages the symbolic significance of the number seven to substantiate his interpretations as being rooted in scientific knowledge. By aligning the number seven with various forms of energy recognised by modern science, Saini seeks to create a bridge between ancient Vedic wisdom and contemporary scientific understanding. He interprets that the recurrence of the number seven in Vedic traditions is not coincidental but indicative of a profound understanding of natural laws and energies. He claims that ancient yogis were aware of the seven forms of energy. This assertion creates an impression of ancient

knowledge as scientifically advanced, though it lacks empirical evidence and scientific validation. By suggesting that ancient yogis had an understanding equivalent to modern physics, Saini overstates the capabilities of ancient practices without providing concrete proof. His reasoning relies heavily on the symbolic significance of the number seven in various aspects of Vedic culture, drawing connections that appears speculative than substantiated. While his examples—that of Saptasindhu, Saptarshi and Saptadweep—highlight the cultural and symbolic importance of the number seven, they do not provide substantial evidence for ancient yogis' scientific understanding. The symbolic use of the number seven in cultural and religious contexts does not inherently indicate an understanding of the seven types of energy recognised by modern physics.

Furthermore, Saini proposes that the meditation practices on the banks of the Saraswati River were ancient techniques to concentrate multiple forms of energy into one. This hypothesis, while intriguing, lacks empirical support. Sampaio et al. identify meditation as “a mental training associated with lasting changes in cognition and emotion.” They observe that “[d]ifferent methodologies have shown that this association and its impact on self-regulation are well established. However, the changes in physical and mental health reported in response to meditation need to be better explored, and their impact on the brain requires further studies” (Sampaio et al. 425). However, apart from emphasising the physical or psychological benefits of the practice of meditation, Saini's argument implies that ancient meditation could manipulate physical energy forms in a way that modern science has yet to comprehend. This portrayal elevates the ancient practices to a quasi-scientific status

without adhering to the rigorous standards of scientific inquiry. Saini's narrative exemplifies how unscientific notions can be presented as scientific propositions through the selective emphasis on culturally significant numbers and symbols. By suggesting that the ancients possessed knowledge equivalent to or surpassing modern scientific understanding, he creates a narrative that both romanticises and rationalises ancient wisdom.

This approach blurs the line between mythology and science. According to Yuval Noah Harari, with *Cognitive Revolution*, a pivotal change in human history happened around 70,000 years ago when *Homo sapiens* developed the ability to create and believe in imagined narratives or fiction, human beings acquired the “ability to transmit information about things that do not really exist, ...” (*Sapiens* 41). Saini's romanticisation of ancient wisdom can be seen as an extension of the narratives born out of the Cognitive Revolution. By interpreting myths, he creates imaginary narratives or “imagined realities” of ancient scientific wisdom. Imagined realities, as Harari argues, have the power to convince people to believe in them. When effective stories succeed in convincing people, “... it gives *Sapiens* immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work towards common goals” (Harari, *Sapiens* 35). This immense power stems from the shared belief in these stories, fostering unity and collective action. In the post-truth world, Saini's imagined reality regarding the golden past of scientific wisdom functions as one such persuasive narrative. This imagined reality appeals to the collective desire for a connection to a glorified past.

Saini repeatedly asserts the superiority of Vedic people over modern science by arguing that ancient Indians had already made scientific breakthroughs which are now regarded as modern discoveries. He argues that Sayana, a fourteenth-century Indian scholar, had recorded the speed of sunlight much before the Western scientists. Saini claims:

Sayana ... in his commentary on a hymn in the *Rig Veda* says, “*with deep respect, I bow to the sun who travels 2,202 yojanas in half a nimesha*”. ... a *yojana* is about nine American miles and a *nimesha* is 16/75th of a second. ... Sayana is simply stating the obvious—that sunlight travels at a hundred and eighty-six thousand miles per second! (Sanghi 127)

Saini’s claim suggests that Sayana’s ancient commentary contains a precise measurement of the speed of light, a concept that science only quantified in the modern era.

The claim that Sayana, an Indian from the fourteenth century, had succeeded in calculating the speed of light was popularised by Subhash Kak in his paper “The Speed of Light and Puranic Cosmology.” However, at the very beginning of the paper, Kak asserts that “this value can only be considered to be an amazing coincidence” (113). Moreover, Kak points out that the measurement of *yojana* varies significantly across different texts and purposes.

The usual meaning of *yojana* is about 9 miles as in the *Arthashastra* where it is defined as being equal to 8,000 *dhanu* or “bow,” where each *dhanu* is taken to be about 6 feet. Aryabhata, Brahmagupta and other astronomers used

smaller *yojanas* but such exceptional usage was confined to the astronomers; we will show that the Puranas also use a non-standard measure of *yojana*.

(Kak 114)

The discrepancies in the measurement of *yojana* across various texts underline the non-standardised nature of the measuring units of earlier times, casting doubt on the precision of Sayana's statement. Hence, Kak himself suggests that Sayana's calculation cannot be counted as scientific. Thus, it could be asserted that there exist significant methodological and historical inconsistencies that question its validity as a factual scientific measurement. Sayana's works were interpretations of the Vedas, often containing spiritual and philosophical insights rather than scientific facts as understood by modern standards. Thus, Saini's claim remains a selective reading of texts, reflecting a tendency to seek validation for ancient wisdom by attributing modern scientific principles where they might not have originally existed.

Praising ancient people for their wisdom and potential, Priya and Sir Khan assert that ancient *yogis* had the power to levitate their bodies. Priya presents it as a capability which can be explained scientifically. She states:

The ancient spiritual masters definitely had the ability to lift their bodies into thin air at will. It came from advanced spiritual practices in which they could actually alter the flow of electric currents through their body so that a magnetic field would lift them off the ground. (Sanghi 284)

Priya attempts to present levitation, a concept viewed as mystical or supernatural, as a scientifically plausible phenomenon. As in the Shiva Trilogy, Sanghi also mixes

up science with spirituality. The concepts of electric current and related magnetic fields offer the narrative a kind of scientific aura. These scientific terms strategically anchor the discussion of yogic powers in the scientific territory of electromagnetism, a well-established field in physics.

Priya's explanation of levitation hinges on the idea that the human body can generate and control electric currents, which in turn produce a magnetic field strong enough to counteract gravity. This theory draws on the basic principles of electromagnetism, where electric currents generate magnetic fields, a well-documented scientific fact. However, the leap from generating minor electric currents in the human body to creating a magnetic field powerful enough to cause levitation is immense and unsupported by empirical evidence. While it is true that the human body does produce electric currents, such as those involved in nerve impulses and heartbeats, these are minuscule and incapable of generating significant magnetic fields. The *Krishna Key* simplifies and exaggerates these scientific principles to fit the narrative of ancient *yogis* possessing extraordinary abilities. By suggesting that ancient people were capable of manipulating magnetic fields, Priya not only ascribes a form of advanced knowledge to these practitioners but also indicates that their spiritual achievements have a basis in the physical sciences. By blurring the lines between science and mysticism, Sanghi presents spiritual phenomena as lost scientific art.

According to Khan, the same technology of levitation combined with acoustics and electromagnetism was used in the construction of pyramids in Egypt. However, his claim needs to be more scientific due to the lack of supporting

evidence. His statement falls into the realm of pseudoscience for it fails to adhere to the rigorous standards of empirical validation and rational explanation that are foundational to scientific inquiry. His claim is presented without any historical or archaeological evidence. The pyramids have been the subjects of scholarly investigations by historians, archaeologists, and engineers who have proposed various theories grounded in physical evidence and historical records. These theories on the construction of pyramids include the use of ramps, sledges, and manual labour to move massive stones. Khan's assertion undermines these well-researched theories, offering an alternative explanation that lacks substantiation. While there are speculative theories about using sound waves for levitation, none have been empirically proven on the scale required for pyramid construction. Similarly, there is no documented application of electromagnetism in ancient construction methods. Khan's statement also fails to provide any experimental evidence or theoretical framework that could explain how ancient Egyptians might have harnessed these technologies. Scientific claims require not only a hypothesis but also a method of testing and validation. The absence of such a framework in Khan's assertion undermines its credibility, rendering it more of a speculative narrative than a scientifically grounded theory.

Khan also claims that modern science has understood the possibility of levitation and it is proven scientifically.

A couple of years ago, a team of scientists at the University of St Andrews recreated levitation of objects in the laboratory by reengineering the *Casimir Force*—a force of nature which usually causes objects to stick together. Once

reengineered, the Casimir Force could be used to repel instead of attract.

Professor Ulf Leonhardt and Dr Thomas Philbin showed that the same effect could be used to levitate bigger objects too, even a person! (285)

Khan uses authoritative figures and institutions to lend credibility to his claim. Reference to reputable scientists and a well-known university lends an aura of legitimacy. By stating that “a team of scientists at the University of St Andrews recreated levitation of objects in the laboratory,” Khan’s claim gives the impression of a validated scientific breakthrough. However, there is no verifiable evidence or published research supporting the claim that these scientists achieved levitation of macroscopic objects, let alone human beings. Khan’s claim exemplifies how hypothetical narratives can be misrepresented as established facts. The use of scientific jargon and references to real phenomena can mislead people into believing unverified and speculative ideas as scientifically proven facts. This technique blurs the line between science and fiction, contributing to the spread of misinformation. The scientists mentioned by Khan are not fictional characters but are inspired by real researchers. The University of St. Andrews had claimed that their scientists had discovered a new way of levitating tiny objects in 2007 (University of St Andrews). However, levitation remains an unscientific notion because no one, including the St Andrews scientists, could prove it scientifically till date. The Casimir Force is indeed a real scientific phenomenon. It is a quantum force that acts between two close, uncharged conducting plates in a vacuum, causing them to attract due to the vacuum fluctuations of the electromagnetic field. This force, however, operates on a very small scale and has been observed only in microscopic contexts. The claim that it

can be reengineered to repel objects and enable levitation, especially of macroscopic objects like a person, stretches beyond the current scientific understanding and capabilities.

Like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi also postulates that ancient Indians were aware of nuclear energy and its usage. Major characters in *Krishna Key* uphold the belief that the ancient people of India were aware of powers similar to nuclear energy. In Mataji's perspective, *Shiv lingam* is not just an ancient symbol that represents a certain god called Shiv, rather it represents a "supreme force, an energy that our ancestors chose to call *Shiv*" (Sanghi 42). She claims that nuclear energy was invented in the Vedic age. She presents *Shiva lingam* as a nuclear reactor by drawing a parallel between it with Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC).

The cylindrical structure ... in the picture of BARC is the core nuclear reactor. Its shape is identical to the cylindrical structure of the lingam. ... Like the cylinder of the Shiv lingam, the nuclear reactor too needs a regular supply of water to cool it down as it heats up during the process of generating energy. Notice the coils around the main reactor? Those are the structures built to dispose of the water—just like the coils around the lingam!

(41)

In Mataji's view, *Shiv lingam* generates atomic energy, which is why the water flowing from the *lingam* in Shiv temples is not considered holy; she contends that the water passing through the spout of the lingam becomes irradiated which makes it non-consumable. Mataji's comparison is an attempt to rationalise the mythological and religious significance of the *Shiv lingam* by equating it with a modern scientific

apparatus. By doing so, she implies that ancient Indians were aware of and utilised nuclear technology long before its modern discovery. In order to provide a scientific outlook to her claims, she quotes Oppenheimer, the founder of the atomic bomb, who had alluded to the *Bhagavat Gita* after the successful test of the first nuclear bomb in 1945. She maintains that Oppenheimer had quoted from the *Bhagavat Gita* since he was aware of an ancient nuclear age recorded in the ancient Hindu scriptures. However, the comparison between the cylindrical shape of the *Shiv lingam* and a nuclear reactor core is superficial and lacks substantive evidence. While both structures may share a cylindrical form, this geometric similarity does not imply functional or technological equivalence. The form of the *Shiv lingam* is a symbolic and religious artefact deeply rooted in Hindu tradition, representing the deity Shiva and encompassing spiritual meaning rather than technological application. Mataji's claims rely on superficial similarities and symbolic interpretations rather than empirical evidence of technological understanding.

According to *Krishna Key*, *Shiv lingam*, being a divine entity and representative of one of the powerful gods, possesses radioactive properties and the ancient people were well aware of it. It is stated that Kurkude's scientific team has recorded the radioactivity level across the country and twenty-four locations are found to be highly radioactive. Saini analyses the data, excluding places where nuclear reactors are situated, and he concludes that apart from Agra and Mount Kailash, all other sites of high radioactivity are the locations of twelve sacred *Shiv lingams* in India. Though the claim lacks empirical proof, it is also presented as a scientific discovery in *Krishna Key*. The use of scientific terminology, the

involvement of a scientific team, and data analysis contribute to a facade of scientific rigour even though, the claim remains unscientific because of the lack of empirical validation and methodological transparency.

Similar to Saini's observation, Sir Khan claims that the Bel tree (*Aegle marmelos*) is considered sacred in Hinduism and its leaves are common offerings to the *Shiv lingams* due to scientific reasons—to reduce the radioactivity of *Shiv lingams*. According to Khan, some scientists have discovered that *Aegle marmelos* possesses a radio-protective effect and their study proved that *Aegle marmelos* is effective in protecting human peripheral blood lymphocytes against radiation, DNA damage and genomic instability. Khan's assertion relies heavily on the purported findings of unnamed scientists and an unspecified publication in a well-regarded journal. He emphasises that the study was published in the "*Oxford Journal*" in order to showcase the credibility of his claim though he does not provide any specific details about the journal, article or the scientists who conducted the experiment. Just like the post-truth claims, Khan's claim does not bear any scientific backing; still, he encourages people to believe in it by mentioning the name of a credible institution and scientific jargon. By using vague references to authoritative sources and leveraging the cultural significance of ancient practices, the narrative creates an illusion of scientific legitimacy.

The portrayal of the Bel tree's sacredness and its supposed scientific utility reflects a broader trend of merging traditional religious practices with modern scientific explanations. By suggesting that the ancient practice of offering Bel leaves to *Shiv lingams* had an unrecognised scientific basis, the narrative attempts to bridge

the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary science. This approach appeals to a sense of cultural pride and continuity, suggesting that ancient practices were underpinned by advanced scientific knowledge. However, this blending of science and tradition can also contribute to the spread of pseudoscientific beliefs. Presenting unverified claims as scientific facts without proper evidence undermines the principles of scientific inquiry and critical thinking. It fosters a narrative where belief and anecdote are given the same importance as empirical evidence and peer-reviewed research.

Sir Khan presents the lead pillars (pillars of teak wood encased in lead plating) in the Somnath temple as evidence of the radioactive properties of the *Shiv lingam*. According to him, the presence of lead pillars instead of gold pillars in such an extravagant structure is strange. He states that “the original accounts” on the temple talk about fifty-six gold pillars covered with fabulous stones, although he does not refer to any particular source. He goes on to state that the later accounts during the attack on the temple by Ghazni refer to fifty-six lead pillars. Khan indicates a probability of the transmutation of gold pillars into lead pillars over the ages, owing to the nuclear properties of the *Shiv lingam* present in the temple. He claims that it is a scientifically proven fact that lead can be turned to gold through neutron bombardment. “It has also been proved that it is much easier to turn gold into lead through neutron capture or beta decay than the reverse” (Sanghi 283). He adds that the theory of nuclear transmutation of gold pillars in the Somnath temple is not something that he had invented, but “[i]t’s what every piece of history seems to be telling ...” (283).

However, John Matson, in his article titled “Fact or Fiction? Lead Can Be Turned into Gold,” opines:

With the dawn of the atomic age in the 20th century, however, the transmutation of elements finally became possible. Nowadays nuclear physicists routinely transform one element to another. In commercial nuclear reactors, uranium atoms break apart to yield smaller nuclei of elements such as xenon and strontium as well as heat that can be harnessed to generate electricity. In experimental fusion reactors heavy isotopes of hydrogen merge together to form helium.

Matson points out that the transmutation of elements, including turning lead into gold, is scientifically possible, primarily through neutron bombardment in a controlled laboratory setting. This process involves altering the atomic structure by changing the number of protons in the nucleus of an atom. However, such transmutations require high-energy reactions typically facilitated by particle accelerators or nuclear reactors. However, Khan’s claim that such transmutation of gold to lead could naturally occur in the setting of the Somnath temple’s pillars is highly speculative and lacks scientific support. Transmutation in natural settings, especially at the scale implied for large architectural features like temple pillars, is not supported by any known physical or chemical processes occurring in such environments. If such transformations were naturally occurring at a site like the Somnath temple, there would likely be substantial radiation hazards, affecting not only the immediate environment but also pose serious health risks to human beings in proximity. There is no historical or contemporary evidence to suggest that such

hazardous conditions have ever existed around the temple pillars, nor are there reports of radiation sickness linked to such sites.

According to Khan, the secret left behind by Krishna is Syamantaka which Khan perceives as the real philosopher's stone. He does not consider Syamantaka as just a jewel as it is mentioned in the myths but as a nuclear isotope having the power to produce gold through nuclear transmutation. He argues that the *Shiv linga* at the Somnath temple possessed nuclear properties and the reason behind it was the Syamantaka which was kept safe inside it. He suspects that Ghazni was greeting his death by carrying the radiated material to his homeland after destroying the *Shiv linga* of Somnath temple. He asks Priya: "Isn't it surprising that Ghazni invaded India seventeen times and survived, but died within a few years of attacking Somnath? Ghazni lay dead due to lethal strain of tuberculosis at the age of fifty-nine" (Sanghi 339). In Khan's view, one of the major motives of Ghazni to attack Somnath temple was to seize the Syamantaka for he was aware of the importance of the stone being a descendant of Krishna.

By suggesting Ghazni's death was a result of his encounter with radioactive material from the destroyed *Shiv linga*, *Krishna Key* adds a layer of intrigue and mystery and transforms a historical figure's death into a conspiracy theory. The novel plants seeds of doubt and suspicion by drawing attention to Ghazni's numerous successful invasions and his sudden death shortly after attacking Somnath. This narrative technique utilises historical coincidences, presenting them as evidence of a hidden cause. Khan's narrative mirrors real-world conspiracy theories, which often focus on selective interpretation of facts in the absence of

direct evidence to support alternative explanations. The novel's portrayal of Ghazni's death illustrates how speculative narratives can shape perceptions of historical events. The narrative encourages one to question established historical accounts and consider alternative possibilities by suggesting a hidden cause behind the historical occurrence.

Saini also believes in the superior knowledge of ancient Indians in nuclear energy. He, just like Sir Khan, hypothesises that Syamantaka, a stone mentioned in Krishna myths which Saini believes to be the secret that Krishna left behind, is a source of nuclear energy. He postulates that the stone could have been kept secretly in the Taj Mahal because Raja Man Singh was the guardian of the stone and later, it was his family who handed over the palace to Shah Jahan where the Taj Mahal was constructed. As a corroborating pointer, Saini posits that the gardens around the Taj Mahal were planted systematically with medicinal herbs to defend against the radiation from Syamantaka.

Bel has a radioprotective quality. Harshringar is used for treating respiratory ailments. Ketaki is used for treating blood disorders—these were all medicinal herbs! They were planted at the Taj because the Syamantaka would have released radiation and these herbs would have neutralised the effects of it.

(Sanghi 446)

Saini also claims that *Badshahnamah*—an officially recorded history of the reign of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan—contains a reference to possible nuclear transmutation.

In the *Badshahnamah* we are told that in 1632, a fence of solid gold was placed around Mumtaz Mahal's sarcophagus. It contained over forty thousand *tolas* of pure gold. Some years later the fence was no longer seen at the site. Why? Isn't it possible that the railing had not started out as gold but only transmuted to gold later on and hence needed to be removed for security reasons? Alternatively, isn't it also possible that the railing was originally gold but transmuted to an alternative metal and was thus removed because it was no longer in keeping with the richness of the surroundings? (446)

Though Saini considers two alternatives for the removal of the fence, he does not look for simpler, more plausible explanations such as the removal of it for reuse or reallocation to other sites. The fence's removal for reasons related to security (to prevent theft) or aesthetic adjustments could be more likely than the proposed hypothesis of transmutation. The idea of metal transmutation, particularly in an uncontrolled environment like the historical setting of a sarcophagus, is scientifically implausible without the involvement of sophisticated processes typically found in nuclear reactors or particle accelerators. Metals do not naturally transmute into gold or other metals under normal environmental conditions. Saini's failure to consider non-radioactive reasons for the fence's removal, such as aesthetic change or practical considerations (like maintenance), suggests a bias towards a more sensational but scientifically unsupported theory. He goes for selective interpretation which is a common cognitive bias where individuals favour information that supports their existing beliefs and hypotheses while disregarding alternative explanations.

Saini adds that the yellowing of the Taj Mahal could also be a result of radiation from the Syamantaka. He maintains that scientific researchers have proven that the yellowing of the Taj Mahal is caused neither by industrial pollution nor by acid rain.

... B. B. Lal, a scientist with the Archaeological Survey of India, ... has stated in writing that chemical and petrographic studies have shown that the marble of the Taj Mahal has not undergone mineralogical alteration, nor is there any evidence of chemical weathering. No impact of acidic gases in the air has been detected, as there is hardly any perceptible sulphation of the marble! ... data on rainwater quality showed pH values between 6.1 and 7.7—a perfectly neutral range, indicating that there was no acid rain. ... Stones such as granite and marble have natural radiation properties but no one had bothered to check whether the radiation from the marble was within ordinary limits. It is this slightly elevated radiation that is causing the colour change—radiation from such a source that lies somewhere within this marble edifice. (447-48)

However, in contrast to Saini's argument, the existing studies identify various pollutants as the reason for the discolouration of the Taj Mahal (Nagar et al., J. K. Singh et al., Agrawal, Bergin et al.). By ignoring established scientific evidence and promoting a more sensational theory, Saini succumbs to confirmation bias and undermines critical thinking. His selective use of data contributes to the spread of pseudoscientific ideas.

Krishna Key suggests that since ancient Indians were adept at nuclear energy, they had developed nuclear weapons as well. According to the novel, in the mythological Mahabharata war, nuclear weapons were used which resulted in total destruction of the civilisation and their wisdom. As a piece of evidence, it is stated that Professor Rajaram Kurkude has discovered a “layer of radioactive ash” near Jodhpur, Rajasthan.

An incredibly high rate of birth defects and an even higher rate of cancer among the inhabitants had prompted the research project. ... Kurkude’s team has apparently unearthed an ancient city where they have found adequate proof of an atomic blast dating back thousands of years—anywhere between five thousand to twelve thousand years ago. (Sanghi 106-07)

There are many articles on the internet about the discovery of an irradiated ancient city in India (Dani; Saha). *Krishna Key* also reproduces the same narrative.

However, no scientific article or proof exists stating the same.

Elaborating on the discovery of an ancient irradiated city, *Krishna Key* mentions an archaeologist named Francis Taylor who found etchings on a nearby Hindu temple—some kind of prayer to protect the people from the “great light” coming for them. Sanghi asserts that such a finding is enough for the common people to believe the ancient people’s supremacy of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons. However, the novel forsakes that the term “great light” is ambiguous and open to various interpretations. In literary and religious texts, references to intense light are often symbolic or metaphorical, representing divine presence, enlightenment, or other supernatural phenomena. Hence, suggesting a direct link

between the description of a “great light” and the characteristics of nuclear explosions remains hypothetical without specific and clear evidence.

Kurkude, being a scientist, attempts to prove his belief—that ancient Indians used nuclear weapons—scientifically. One of his team members, a young nuclear physicist from IIT (Indian Institute of Technology), asserts that during the excavations of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, skeletons of human beings were found as if they had died suddenly at an unexpected moment in the midst of some daily activities. Moreover, he argues, those skeletons were thousands of years old and were “the most radioactive ever found—almost equal to those left behind at Hiroshima and Nagasaki” (Sanghi 118). Since there are no historical records of a volcanic eruption in the region, the young nuclear physicist concludes that they had died in a nuclear attack. Hence, he suggests it as evidence for his supposition that ancient Indians were familiar with nuclear technology. He adds:

There are other cities in northern India that also show indications of explosions of great ferocity. One such city—between the Ganges and the mountains of Rajmahal—was subjected to very intense heat. Massive walls and foundations of the ancient city are lying fused together—vitrified! ... the intense heat required to melt clay vessels or fuse foundations can only be explained by a massive nuclear reaction. (120)

Kurkude agrees with his fellow scientist and believes that the presence of high radiation in the area could not be explained without assuming there was nuclear activity in the ancient age. Kurkude, like Mataji, claims that Oppenheimer—creator of the modern atomic bomb—had commented after the successful experimental

explosion of the first nuclear bomb that “it probably wasn’t the first atomic bomb, *but the first atomic bomb in the modern times.*” Kurkude wonders whether Oppenheimer’s statement was a clue to the ancient knowledge of nuclear energy and whether “should we take the *Mahabharata* seriously or should we dismiss it as science fiction of an earlier era?” (121)

Another fellow scientist of Kurkude argues that *Mahabharata* describes the destruction caused by a terrible weapon that could be conceived as none other than a nuclear weapon. Intimating that he is quoting from the “Mausala Parva” of *Mahabharata* he states:

The unknown weapon is radiant lightning, a devastating messenger of death, which turned all to ashes—a single projectile charged with all the power of the Universe. An incandescent column of smoke and flame as bright as a thousand suns rose in all its splendour, a perpendicular explosion with its billowing smoke clouds; the cloud of smoke rising after its first explosion formed into expanding round circles like the opening of giant parasols. The corpses were so burned as to be unrecognisable. ... In a very short time, food became poisonous. (121-22)

And he comes to the conclusion that the Brahmastra mentioned in *Mahabharata* is, in fact, a nuclear bomb itself.

However, in his article “Defusing India’s Ancient Atomic Blasts,” science writer Brian Dunning maintains that no archaeological publication even remotely discusses the finding of such an ancient irradiated city anywhere in the world. He

considers the prevailing narrative to be a fictional write-up without having a proper source. According to him,

It looks like every part of this story is fabricated. ... Of the many copy-and-paste plagiarizations of the same article found online, only a few give any source, and that source is given as the *World Island Review*, from January 1992. There is no record of such a publication. ... the original posting of this mysterious article, which was made to an alternative news website called *KeelyNet* in September 2000, but has since been removed. Luckily, it's been archived to the conspiracy theory website *Rense.com*, ... One skeptical researcher tracked down the archaeologist mentioned in the article, Francis Taylor, and found that no such person has ever published anything in the archaeological literature. (Dunning)

Dunning points out that no archaeological research has been published regarding the founding of an irradiated ancient city. He argues:

There is one little fact that casts some pretty grave doubt on the claim that Jodhpur is in a zone with dangerously high radiation. The story says we detect that radiation today, and suffer high birth defects and cancer, left over from this nuclear war 8-12000 years ago. Radioactivity goes down over time, so if it's that lethal today, it would have been even more lethal 550 years ago when the city of Jodhpur was founded. It would seem a poor choice to locate a new city. However, Jodhpur was founded, and has flourished ever since.

Thus, Dunning concludes that “[t]he story of the ancient Indian atomic blasts was written by an anonymous author who gave a false attribution, and probably made up quotes and the people he quoted.” However, Ashwin Sanghi takes up the narrative and presents it as a scientific discovery. He presents the theory within a framework of plausible scientific inquiry by employing scientifically knowledgeable characters to validate the theory. By portraying his characters as scientists, he lends an air of credibility to the debunked story of ancient Indian atomic blasts, transforming it into a compelling narrative that blurs the line between fact and fiction.

In the novel *Krishna Key* Devendra Chhedi, who is presented as the world’s leading authority in Somatic Cell Nuclear Transfer (SCNT), also believes that Vedic people were more advanced in science than modern scientists. He claims that ancient civilisations knew more about stem cells than modern humans and he emphasises his point by showing a ritual performed after childbirth as proof of his claim.

After delivery, the midwife would take the umbilical cord of the new born child and place a small portion of it in an airtight copper capsule, and this capsule—known as a *Taviju Raksha*—would be tied below the waist of the child until he grew up, ... The remainder of the umbilical cord would be placed in an earthen jar and buried underground. (Sanghi 188-89)

Chhedi considers the ritual as a predecessor to preserving stem cells from the umbilical cord through cryo-freezing. He portrays an ancient childbirth ritual as evidence of the advanced scientific knowledge possessed by ancient civilisations.

However, stem cells and their potential were only scientifically identified and understood in the modern era, with significant developments occurring in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. No empirical evidence suggests that the practice of preserving the umbilical cord in this manner has any scientific basis or benefits related to stem cells. Modern stem cell storage involves cryopreservation, a technique not reflected in the described ritual. The described practices are more likely rooted in cultural and spiritual beliefs rather than scientific understanding. By selectively interpreting ancient rituals through the modern scientific lens, Chhedi attempts to suggest a hidden layer of advanced knowledge succumbing to his confirmation bias regarding the superiority of ancient wisdom.

Chhedi also claims that ancient Indians knew more medicines and medical treatments than modern people can agree with.

Vedic surgeons wrote about plastic surgery, extraction of cataracts, dental surgery, caesarean sections and bone-setting. ... Shushruta's path-breaking treatise describes rhinoplasty in which a mutilated nose can be reconstructed through plastic surgery! The *Charaka Samhita* by Charaka discusses physiology, etiology, embryology, digestion, metabolism, immunity and even genetics. (189)

In Chhedi's understanding, the Vedic people were familiar with genetic cloning and if we read between the lines of ancient literature, we could find evidence for the same. Chhedi's claim relies heavily on the reinterpretation of ancient texts through a modern lens, often stretching beyond what the evidence can reliably support. His assertion illustrates a common tendency to project contemporary scientific

knowledge onto ancient practices, creating an anachronistic narrative. This approach appeals to cultural pride and the fascination with lost wisdom but lacks empirical support. Reinterpreting mythology, Chhedi presumes that Ravana, who is described as a demon with ten heads, was not a single person but rather ten persons who had been genetically cloned from a single person—Ravana. Chhedi considers the story of Raktabija as yet another example to prove his point. According to myths, Raktabija had the ability to grow a duplicate form of himself from each drop of blood that fell on the earth. Chhedi interprets the stories of Ravana and Raktabija as instances to prove the excellence of ancient Indians in genetic cloning. He adds that the myth of Brahma born out of the umbilicus of Vishnu could be indicative of the Vedic people's awareness of the significance of the umbilical cord and the presence of stem cells in it.

Chhedi emphasises the advanced knowledge of Vedic people and maintains that they even knew about in vitro fertilisation. He shows the myth of Balrama, Krishna's elder brother who was transferred from Devaki's womb to that of Rohini, as evidence for his belief. In Chhedi's opinion, "[w]hen the *Vishnu Purana* spoke of *Akaasa*—it was simply referring to the universe's pluripotential stem substance" (191). Considering Krishna as a historical figure of flesh and blood, Chhedi looks for a reasonable explanation for the verse in *Bhagawat Gita* which states that Krishna is eternal, permanent and indestructible. He then assumes that when it was said that Krishna was killed by an arrow, it would have actually referred to a process of ancient DNA extraction. Unlike a scientist, Chhedi uses selective interpretation and anecdotal evidence from myths to claim advanced scientific knowledge

possessed by ancient Indians. His interpretations reflect confirmation bias, where he selectively superimposes modern scientific concepts into ancient myths to support his existing belief regarding ancient people's superior knowledge. This approach disregards contradictory evidence and the symbolic nature of myths. The post-truth claims regarding the existence of genetic engineering and plastic surgery in ancient India can be read along with Chhedi's assertions.

Saini, like Chhedi, attempts to attribute some major scientific discoveries to the Vedic civilisation. He claims that the Big Bang theory was explained by the Upanishads. According to Saini and Priya, Upanishads provide a wonderful framework for the question of where the energy required for the Big Bang originated if energy cannot be created and destroyed in the first place.

According to Hindu scripture, the universe never came into existence at any given point of time. It always existed, but remained in a state of perpetual flux ... What we call *the universe* is simply *the present universe*. Each universe starts with a Big Bang, and expands to a point, before it starts shrinking. The universe eventually collapses back into the singularity from which it had emerged and a new expanding universe begins once again. This is the reason that 108 is considered sacred. *One*—represents the singularity from which the universe emerges, *zero*—the egg or *anda* of the present universe, and *eight*—infinity or the maximum extent of expansion in the eight directions from which contraction must happen. (453-54)

Saini tries to connect the Big Bang theory to ancient Hindu scriptures—the Upanishads. He suggests that ancient civilisations had insights into what modern

science is only now discovering. The symbolism of the number 108 and its explanation using the lens of cosmology demonstrates an effort to infuse scientific symbolism into cultural and religious numerology. Such an interpretation attempts to provide a scientific basis for why certain numbers are considered sacred, connecting them to universal cosmological processes. Saini postulates that the Sanskrit word for the universe, *Brahmanda*, encapsulates the Big Bang theory for *Brahma* denotes expanding and *anda* means egg. Thus, the word itself becomes a self-explaining model for the ever-expanding egg-shaped universe. Saini also intertwines the Big Bang theory with the concepts of Shiv (Shiva) and Vish (Vishnu). According to him, Vish represents the expansion of energy whereas Shiv represents the contraction of matter back to energy. The integration of Hindu deities into this scientific narrative further aligns with an attempt to frame mythological beliefs within scientific paradigms.

Krishna Key depicts Mount Kailash, the abode of the god Shiva in mythology, as another proof of ancient people's scientific and technological superiority. According to Sir Khan, it is the epitome of the craftsmanship of the ancient Indians. He suggests Mount Kailash could be a human-made pyramid instead of a natural mountain.

The beauty and majesty of Kailash ... do not lie in its height but in its unique shape. Kailash has four flat faces—and each face corresponds with the cardinal points of the compass. ... it sits in isolated splendour—which ensures that Kailash is not dominated by a neighbouring mountain. It is Sumeru—the spiritual core of the world. The land surrounding Mount Kailash is the origin

of four life-giving rivers ... Two lakes lie at the foothills of the mountain. Mansarovar Lake, probably one of the highest freshwater lakes in the world, is round in shape, like the sun. the lower lake, Rakshastal, is a saltwater lake and is shaped like a crescent moon. ... It is perfectly plausible that humans may have fashioned a pyramid at this sacred spot. (305)

Based on a sketch of Mount Kailash which he believes to be made by the Russians, Sir Khan proposes that the presence of the Vedic sacred number 108 could be found in the case of Mount Kailash, which in turn suggests its human-made nature.

If you see the curvature of the west face, it measures 108 degrees—exactly the divine Vedic number. The north face is much less concave—just 30 degrees, but when we add this to the curve of the ridge that adjoins Mount Kailas, we once again get 108 degrees—another instance of the Vedic sacred number. (308)

Hence, Sir Khan proposes Mount Kailash as a structure built by ancient Indians rather than a natural mountain. However, his analysis heavily relies on speculative interpretation and symbolic associations rather than a scientific approach. The symbolism he draws from the shapes of Mansarovar Lake and Rakshastal Lake illustrates a tendency to interpret natural features through a symbolic lens. This interpretation is subjective and does not provide any empirical evidence to prove these lakes were deliberately designed to represent solar and lunar energy. Sir Khan selectively focuses on features of Mount Kailash and its surroundings that fit his theory, ignoring other possible explanations or contradictory evidence. This

selective observation is a notable trait of confirmation bias, where one acknowledges information that supports their preconceived beliefs only.

Saini also shares the belief that Mount Kailash is a human-made structure. According to Saini, it can be called an alchemist's pyramid. He states that the pyramid is the ultimate symbol of alchemy which reflects the spiritual dimensions of alchemy by emphasising the belief that a pyramid can bring life back into the dead. Saini describes the theory of Orgone or life force, affirming the possibility of a pyramid's capability to transform death into life. Though Wilhelm Reich first proposed the theory in the 1930s, Saini argues that the concept was familiar to the Vedic sages long back. Identifying orgone as the life energy, Reich advocated that the deficit of orgone leads to various diseases. The theory was discarded as unscientific because it lacked scientific proof (Isaacs 240). However, Saini in *Krishna Key* claims: "the National Centre for Complementary and Alternative Medicine in the US still treats Orgone as a model for some clinical procedures!" (Sanghi 417). When Radhika enquires about the scientific basis for the theory of Orgone, Saini claims that several pieces of research are still ongoing and he states:

One amateur Canadian researcher from Vancouver built a full-sized copper pyramid in Abbotsford. He distributed several cuts of meat throughout the inside of his pyramid. According to his observations, the meat near the walls of the pyramid rotted, while a cut of meat in the centre of the pyramid remained entirely preserved even after months. (418)

Though he mentions "one amateur Canadian researcher," Saini does not provide any name to verify his argument. Saini adds that whether he believes in the theory or not

is important, but the significant part is that the ancient people believed in it.

According to Saini, if the ancient people had believed in it, it could have been the truth. He deduces that Mount Kailash could be considered an alchemist's pyramid meant to be an accumulator of life energy.

Apart from the ancient people's belief, Saini has no evidence to prove his claim. Still, he decides to value belief over reality. Saini's narrative suggests a potential conspiracy against the Orgone theory by the industrial tycoons to suppress information about its potential, especially concerning its deficiency near telecom towers and chemical plants. However, the Orgone theory was never validated by the broader scientific community. According to Kenneth S. Isaacs, the orgone was "a useless fiction with faulty basic premises, thin partial theory, and unsubstantiated application results. It was quickly discredited and cast away" (240). J. E. Roedelein maintains that the "current consensus of scientific opinion is that Reich's orgone theory is basically a psychoanalytic system gone awry and is an approach that represents something most ludicrous and totally dismissable" (518). Nevertheless, Saini is willing to believe in the orgone theory even in the absence of empirical proof. He elevates unsubstantiated information to the level of accepted fact based on the appeal of his narrative and the supposed suppression of the truth by powerful entities.

Numerology, the belief in the divine or mystical relationship between numbers and coinciding events, is also depicted in *Krishna Key* as scientific truth. Certain numbers are given significance in various belief systems and *Krishna Key* tries to provide seemingly reasonable explanations for such consideration in Indian

mythology or Hindu belief system. Mataji presents the number 108 as holy according to Vedic knowledge. She observes that the Lord Vishnu has 108 names and the rosary has 108 beads. She explains to Taarak:

The rosary represents the ecliptic—the path of the sun and moon across the sky. Yogis divide the ecliptic into twenty-seven equal sections called *nakshatras*, and each of these into four equal *padas*—or steps—marking the 108 steps that the sun and moon take through the skies, ... What's truly amazing is the fact that the distance between the earth and the sun is exactly 108 times the sun's diameter. More incredible is the fact that the distance between the earth and the moon is 108 times the moon's diameter. Finally, ... the diameter of the sun is 108 times the earth's diameter. (Sanghi 157)

Mataji's claim creates an impression that the ancient people were aware of the diameters of the earth, sun and moon; however, there exists no proof for that. She also asserts that the number nine represents God and wholeness. In order to support her argument, she uses a mathematical property of the number nine: "if you multiply 9 by anything the answer is always 9 when you add the digits together." She states: "... 9 represents God. That's why we have 9 nights of *Navaratri*; that's also why we worship the *Navagraha*—the 9 planets. God multiplied by anything is always God, since God is all there is!" (158). Mataji discusses the number nine, associating it with divinity and completeness. She illustrates this by pointing to the mathematical property of the digit sum of multiples of nine always reducing back to nine. This characteristic is mathematically accurate and is known as casting out nines, a method used for checking calculations traditionally. However, the leap from this

mathematical curiosity to spiritual or divine significance remains a pseudoscientific approach.

Similar to Mataji's claim, analysing the swastika symbol—the “*one* symbol that is composed of *eight* limbs,” Saini lays emphasis on the numbers one and eight as though they are sacred and scientific at the same time. Talking about the city of Dholavira, Saini specifies that the city's length and width as well as the main castle's proportion were found to be 5:4 during the excavation. Saini considers it an important piece of information for both the rations add up to nine, the sacred number. In his view, the number eight also bears divine connotations. “Eight is supreme. That's why Krishna was the *eighth* child; he was the *eighth* avatar of Vishnu; and was born on the *eighth* day of Rohini!,” states Saini (262).

Along with the numbers nine and eight, five is another number that Saini portrays as divine relying on Vedic mathematics.

... at the very heart of the magic square is the number five. ... Each interior angle of a regular pentagon is 108 degrees! ... the magic of *one*, *zero* and *eight*, yet again! ... Five at the centre of the magic square; five sides of a pentagon; five Pandavas were at the centre of the Mahabharata war, Draupati had five children, Yayati had five sons, the chariot flag of Bhishma bore five stars, Krishna asked Duryodhana for five villages, and *Panchamrut* is a mixture of five elements that is used in ... worship. (262)

Saini even tries to connect America's decision to build their war headquarters in the shape of a pentagon to that of Vedic mathematics and the importance of five as he

conceives it. Talking about mystical numbers, Saini elaborates on the significance of the number 18 which is considered the holiest of numbers.

... 18, 108, 1008, 10008—and further similar variations—are all considered sacred. The *Mahabharata* has 18 chapters; there were 18 Yadava clans of Krishna; Jarasandha attacked Mathura 18 times; the Mahabharata war lasted 18 days; 18 armies fought the great battle; there were 18 chapters in each of our *Vedas*; there are 18 *Puranas*; there were 18 *Maharathi*—or exalted—warriors in the Mahabharata war; there are 18 chapters in the *Bhagawad Gita*... (436-37)

For Saini, the numbers five, eight, nine and eighteen are divine since there are various instances of the appearance of these numbers in myths. He presents his belief as part of Vedic mathematics and claims it to be scientific although it is self-contradictory for science does not work relying on beliefs.

However, a critical examination of the assertions related to numbers made in the novel *Krishna Key* reveals a pattern of pseudoscience, where anecdotal and selective interpretations are presented as scientific facts. The analysis of Dholavira city's proportions, the assertion that Krishna was the eighth child, and his connection to the number eight, further demonstrate how numerical coincidences are often imbued with undue significance. Saini's observation regarding the Pentagon building in America and its relation with Vedic mathematics—because of its five-sided shape—exemplifies a common pseudoscientific tactic: drawing far-fetched connections between unrelated facts to construct an appealing narrative. Such claims are compelling and can resonate with cultural sentiments and spiritual beliefs, but

they lack the rigour and empirical support required for scientific acceptance. Thus, the scientists and academicians in *Krishna Key*—including Saini, Kurkude, Priya and Chhedi—establish themselves as believers of certain belief systems and omens rather than relying on scientific principles of verifiability and rationality. They resemble commentators and scientists of the present age who often deny scientific methods and rationalism in favour of myths.

Just like Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, Anand Neelakantan also portrays ancient Indians as very much advanced in science and technology. Ravana asserts that the Asura school of Mayans were great architects who were “great city builders.” They had produced books on “art and architecture, city-planning, parks and amusement centres, temples and theatres.” In Ravana’s opinion, the later Vishwakarma school, established by Devas, “paled in comparison to the Mayans” (Neelakantan 27). According to Ravana, during the heyday of Asura’s reign, they had “superior warfare strategies” and “better engineers to create machines of war” (28).

As in the Shiva Trilogy, Brahma is not a divine entity in *Asura* but a family of scholars. Brahma, Ravana’s teacher, claims that before the Deva invasion of their civilisation, they had “even developed a flying machine—the *Pushpaka*” (37). As the narrative progresses, Mayan, Ravana’s father-in-law, develops that prototype into a real flying machine during Ravana’s reign (138). According to Neelakantan, the mythological *Pushpaka Vimana* resembles modern aeroplanes in shape. “It had huge wings that did not flap but whirled round dazzlingly fast. It looked like a bird, yet it also resembled a fish. It had some levers ...” (293). According to Neelakantan,

Ravana used the same flying machine to abduct Sita to Lanka (314). Narratives portraying ancient Indians as the pioneers of the world's first flying machine prevail in the Indian post-truth context. Vinaya Deshpande in "Rishi has Given Guidelines to Make Planes," reports that a research paper on aviation technology, presented at the 2015 Indian Science Congress, asserted that *Rishis* (sages) of the ancient age were adept in aviation technology. As per the report, the paper stated: "Maharshi Bharadwaj has narrated guidelines for making aeroplanes. There are 97 reference books for aviation. In Brihatvimanshastra, he has given 500 guidelines." Following this, in 2017, *Outlook India* reported in their article that the then Human Resource and Development minister demanded Indian Institute of Technology students should be taught about *pushpaka vimana*—the mythical flying chariot mentioned in *Ramayana* ("Teach IIT Students"). Proponents of ancient aviation technology selectively use mythological texts to support their claims while ignoring the lack of empirical evidence. This selective interpretation aligns with their preconceived beliefs about the advanced nature of ancient Indian civilisation. Anand Neelakantan's narrative of the ancient flying craft aligns with the post-truth narratives regarding ancient aviation theory, which seek to elevate the past and assert cultural superiority.

The select Indian English mythological fictions—the Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi, *Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi and *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan—reimagine and rationalise mythological events as instances of scientific superiority of ancient people. As observed by Robert A. Segal, in the contemporary era, "[i]nstead of setting myth against science" attempts are made to turn "myth into

science” (13). The efforts to turn myth into science involve the re-examination of mythological narratives to uncover potential scientific truths that may have been encoded in these narratives. For instance, myths that describe cosmic events, natural phenomena, or human experiences are often reinterpreted to suggest that ancient people possessed a rudimentary understanding of scientific principles, even if these were expressed in symbolic or metaphorical terms. The idea that myths may contain “ancient wisdom” or “hidden knowledge” about the natural world gained momentum in the post-truth world, leading to the speculation that ancient cultures had an advanced understanding of science that was encoded in their mythological narratives. While myths may reflect the scientific understanding of their time, it cannot be confirmed that they were aware of modern scientific concepts or their knowledge was superior to modern scientific understanding. Instead of treating myths as records of ancient scientific wisdom, they can also be appreciated as the science fiction of their age—stories that push the boundaries of what was conceivable, using the tools of imagination to explore the unknown. The distinction between comprehending myth as science or myth as science fiction lies in the approach and the lens through which one chooses to interpret these ancient narratives.

The Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* reinterpret mythological stories to align with modern scientific understandings. They depict myths as reservoirs of ancient scientific knowledge and present divine incidents and events in myths as events with scientific rationale. In a way, they seek the sanction of modern science for myths and subsequently present mythology as inherently composed of scientific

temper. They provide a scientific aura to mythical incidents and imagine the ancient Indian people as a society with abundant scientific knowledge that is difficult to comprehend in the contemporary world. It has been observed that the “[e]xposure to the West ... inspired practitioners of Indian traditions to make” their “beliefs and practices more ‘scientific,’ and hence ‘real.’ This trend is perpetuated even today by a generation desperately seeking to reclaim the past!” (Pattanaik 5). In their novels, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi and Anand Neelakantan provide the impression that the ancient people of India were adept in science and technology, most of which were discovered centuries later. In an attempt to produce a “believable” narrative, they, often, use the jargon of modern science to explain mythical incidents. Consequently, they demystify the divine and bridge the gap between ancient myths and modern science. The select novels place ancient wisdom on a pedestal, suggesting the advanced wisdom of the ancient people over the modern discoveries. By transforming mythological elements like Somras, Brahmastra and *Pushpaka Vimana* into tangible scientific achievements, they underscore the notion that ancients had a profound understanding of science that modern society has yet to grasp fully. By embedding scientific terminology within a context of mystical practices and events, these novels lend an air of legitimacy to unverified and speculative claims. This method makes the extraordinary seem plausible and encourages scepticism toward modern scientific understanding while romanticising the past as a period of lost scientific prowess. These narratives also tap into cultural pride by suggesting the advanced wisdom of the ancestors which reinforce a sense of cultural superiority and historical nostalgia.

While the select mythological fictions subtly undermine modern science and technology in favour of ancient wisdom; antipathy towards modern science and concomitant anti-expertism or anti-intellectualism function as defining characteristics of post-truth politics (Block 21; McIntyre 31; Sim 17). Analysing the nature of people in the contemporary era, Jędrzej Czerep states:

Relying on algorithms that suggest what one should see or read offered a fast track to accepting sources that one would normally consider reliable, but due to exposure and community links, viewers started to normalise and internalise them. Therefore, it helped to radicalise the accidental visitors and turn many of them into full-blown science deniers. (35)

Denial of certain sciences acquires a unique dimension in the Indian post-truth discourse compared to other nations. In Indian narratives, modern science gets replaced with Vedic science or Vedic knowledge system which finds its roots in mythology. In the post-truth Indian scenario, modern science is often perceived as a Western product that cannot be idealised by Indians. According to the ethnoreligious ideologues, India had a glorious past during the Vedic period which is portrayed in mythological accounts. Accepting the “Indian knowledge system” is also proposed as a necessary step to “decolonise” the Indian mind (Nanda, “Big Lies”). In India, most post-truth narratives revolve around popular myths, and myths are often counted as the true accounts of history and evidence of the great scientific knowledge of the ancient Indian civilisation.

Observing the paradoxical approach to science—the validity of science and scientific approach is questioned and simultaneously, myths are rationalised using scientific jargon—Meera Nanda opines:

They are obsessed with science the way creation scientists are obsessed with science. They use the vocabulary of science to claim that the most sacred texts of Hinduism—the Vedas, the Upanishads which contain the essence of Vedic teachings (also called Vedanta), and Advaita Vedanta—are, in fact, scientific treatises... (Nanda, *Prophets* 65)

The Vedas, epics and other ancient texts are conceived as containers of scientific knowledge of the ancient civilisations. Science is not a rational way of approaching the world but just another way to comprehend the supremacy of divinity and that is clearly how “[t]he erosion of the supernatural is a vital component of the secularization of consciousness” which leads to abandoning magical thinking and embracing rationality (129). Meera Nanda observes:

Rather than reinterpret the Vedantic postulate of the immanence of the divine spirit in nature as a mythic, or psycho-spiritual hunger for connectedness with the rest of the creation, ... intellectuals reinterpret the available scientific evidence to ‘prove’ that the divine power, or Brahman, acts as an actual force of nature, operating in a dimension which is extra-sensory and supra-rational but nevertheless ‘real.’ (83)

Nanda’s observation highlights the contemporary trend to reconcile and even elevate myths to the status of modern science leaving aside rationality, objectivity and

verifiability. Rather, science is equated with the ancient Vedic knowledge system which centres on the qualities of believability and divinity. By portraying myths as sources of scientific insights into the nature of the universe, life, and consciousness, the select mythological fictions of this study contribute to this narrative.

The Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* follow the same pattern in portraying ancient Indians as well-equipped in science and technology. The novels showcase a broader trend of attributing modern technological concepts to ancient civilisations without evidence. While it is tempting to imagine that ancient civilisations had access to sophisticated technologies, these claims ought to be supported by evidence and rigorous scientific reasoning to be credible. These narratives exemplify how unverified and speculative ideas can be presented as plausible explanations, appealing to the fascination with ancient mysteries. However, they might fail to hold up to scientific scrutiny. In their narratives, the select novels employ a degree of anachronistic projection, where modern technological concepts are retroactively superimposed onto ancient objects. For instance, both the Shiva Trilogy and *Krishna Key* reinterpret ancient weapons through the lens of modern scientific understanding and present them as nuclear weapons. While this can be a compelling way to suggest the advanced nature of ancient civilisations, it often stretches beyond the credible limits of historical evidence and archaeological findings. By attributing modern scientific knowledge to their characters, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi and Anand Neelakantan not only elevate the characters' intellectual stature but also suggest that ancient civilisations may have possessed scientific insights that are only now being "rediscovered" and

getting acknowledged in modern times. The usage of scientific jargon strategically positions the ancient people within a scientific framework, suggesting that the division between science and spirituality could be more permeable than conventionally thought.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The deconstruction of myth is not a novel practice in Indian English fiction, yet it acquires a special significance in the post-truth era. In India, many debates revolve around the historicity of mythology and the superiority of ancient Indians in terms of science and technology. The present thesis has attempted to analyse select twenty-first-century Indian English mythological fiction using the framework of the notion of post-truth. The post-truth era has emerged as an influential socio-cultural phenomenon, necessitating scholarly intervention and comprehension. Building upon Meera Nanda's proposition concerning the peculiar significance of myths in Indian post-truth discourse, the study undertaken has examined the nature of select Indian English mythological fiction within the post-truth discourse. By analysing the *Shiva Trilogy* by Amish Tripathi, *Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi, and *Asura* by Anand Neelakantan, the study explored how contemporary Indian mythological fiction in English either embraces or challenges the fundamental aspect of prevailing post-truth narratives by incorporating or rejecting the characteristics of the post-truth era.

The introductory chapter offers a comprehensive analysis of the concept of post-truth and outlines its key characteristics. It looks into the role of myths and mythological fiction within the post-truth discourse, especially in India. The notion of post-truth fundamentally signifies a socio-political discourse in which believability revolves around securing power and/or advantage through creating and disseminating believable and emotional, but often, irrational and misleading populist

narratives. A significant change in individuals' dispositions regarding factual information and integrity has occurred which paved the way for the emergence of an epoch marked by the prevalence of post-truth ideals. People are increasingly predisposed to embrace comfortable narratives that align with their pre-existing beliefs or that come from particular sources they are inclined to believe without engaging in critical thinking. While the concept of post-truth is not entirely new and has been in existence for centuries; post-truth has distinctly established itself as a distinct legacy in the current century, primarily due to the exponential growth in information technology and social media.

As post-truth places paramount importance on believability, myth and mythological fiction achieve greater significance, especially in the Indian context. Mythological fiction has always enjoyed readership and critical acclaim in Indian literature and recent years have marked an evident escalation in the popularity of mythological fiction. The analysis of select Indian mythological fictions in English suggests that they respond to the post-truth discourse through their deconstructive reading of popular mythology and reflect on certain notions related to the post-truth discourse such as believability, emphasis on ancient ancestry, ethnic pride, a desire to revisit the golden past, and antipathy towards modern science. The select works take up the historical interpretation of mythology as their narrative style and attempt to present the mythological past as the historical truth. The fictional works try to historicize and rationalise the supernatural elements in mythology.

The select mythological fictions have embraced a distinctive narrative approach—the historical interpretation of mythology—in which myths are rendered as

the history of the bygone age. The Shiva Trilogy, *Krishna Key*, and *Asura* camouflage as historical fiction and present mythological events and characters as historical occurrences and personas. They reimagine mythological characters as historical figures and interpret their stories in a plausible historical way. The historical interpretation of mythology in these texts involves associating myths with specific historical periods, anthropomorphising mythological characters, and presenting myths as repositories of ancient scientific wisdom.

The second core chapter, “Reimagining the Past: Historicization of Mythology,” explores how the select fictions adopt the historicization of myths as they very credibly present myths as authentic history. The select novels place myths and mythological characters in historical time frames such as the Indus Valley civilisation and the Vedic civilisation. By placing their narratives within specific historical time frames they picturise myths as plausible historical realities rather than mere imaginary stories. By embedding mythological events and characters in a well-defined historical framework, these works blur the lines between myth and history and present mythological narratives as credible episodes that could have really occurred in the past. Through retelling historical records and blending myth with history, these novels offer a vision of the past that is not only appealing but also serves to foster a strong sense of national and ethnic identity.

The Shiva Trilogy does weave together mythological and fantasy elements to create a rich and complex world and presents it as an episode of ancient history. Amish Tripathi deconstructs the myth of Shiva, one of the three supreme gods in Hinduism, portraying him as a human being who lived during the Indus Valley

civilisation. The city of Meluha, where Shiva and his tribe settled, exhibits several historical elements of the Indus civilisation, such as the Great Bath. However, the trilogy suggests that the Indus civilisation and the Vedic civilisation were one and the same, despite historical evidence to the contrary. *Krishna Key* also assumes that Krishna, the incarnation of the lord Vishnu, lived in India during the period of the Indus Valley civilisation. The characters in *Krishna Key* try to establish the Indus civilisation as the Vedic civilisation. Furthermore, they demand the rechristening of the Indus civilisation as Saraswati civilisation. Like Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, Anand Neelakantan also situates his novel against the backdrop of the Indus and Vedic civilisations. However, the novel *Asura* makes a clear distinction between the two civilisations. According to *Asura*, the Indus civilisation was established by the Indigenous people—the Asuras—whereas the Vedic civilisation was founded by a migrated population that settled in the Indo-Ganges plains later in history. While the Shiva Trilogy and *Krishna Key* align with the prominent post-truth contention that Aryans are the original inhabitants of India, *Asura* portrays Aryans as a group of people who invaded the Indus Valley civilisation built by the native people of the land. Nevertheless, all the select works present myth as history by setting their stories in well-known historical periods by blending myths with historical facts.

The reimagining of history in mythological novels provides a sense of pride and continuity to the majority community. These narratives glorify the past to the extent of creating a mythic historiography that sometimes conflicts with academic historical research. Subsequently, mythological fiction plays a crucial role in the glorification of the majoritarian ethnicity in the post-truth era. These narratives often

reinforce the perceived superiority of one group over others by depicting them as central to the nation's historical and cultural achievements. This not only elevates the status of the majoritarian group but also often overlooks the contributions and presence of other groups within the historical tapestry of the nation. In the select novels, there is a deliberate fusion of the Indus Valley civilisation with Vedic tradition, renaming it the Saraswati civilisation after the mythically revered river mentioned in Vedic texts. Such portrayals deliberately ignore or contest the widely accepted archaeological and linguistic evidence supporting the theory of Aryan migration into the Indian subcontinent. By doing so, these mythological fictions challenge established historical narratives and promote a version of history that aligns with ethno-religious ideologies, which often resist notions of foreign origins.

The concept of a golden past serves as a powerful narrative element both in post-truth discourse and in Indian mythological fiction. This idea of a historical period characterised by prosperity and harmony is deeply ingrained in the collective consciousness of the society which is often invoked to inspire or legitimise contemporary agendas. The portrayal of such a golden past resonates with the audience which provides both a sense of nostalgia for the past and a glorious benchmark to compare the present. The select mythological fictions frequently refer to a golden era, often associating it with the Indus Valley civilisation. The Indus civilisation, known for its advanced urban planning, sophisticated craftsmanship, and vibrant trade systems, provides a historical backdrop of prosperity and advanced knowledge. In mythological fiction, by conveniently neglecting the harsh realities of

the time, these historical nuances are often enhanced to depict an almost utopian society where spiritual and material prosperity coexist harmoniously.

Chapter three, titled “From Deities to Humans: Anthropomorphising Mythological Characters,” underscores the significance of the anthropomorphisation of mythological characters which contributes significantly to the process of historicization and rationalisation of mythology. The portrayal of myths as factual historical events necessitates the rationalisation of mythology and the process of anthropomorphising mythological characters facilitates this rationalisation. By presenting mythological figures—the gods and demons in myths—as relatable characters with human traits, the select novels transform the myths more grounded in reality, skillfully employing cognitive bias and confirmation bias, leading them to be perceived as historical accounts rather than purely mythical tales. In the portrayal of superhuman characters, *The Shiva Trilogy*, *Krishna Key*, and *Asura* employ various approaches. In the *Shiva Trilogy*, the superhuman nature of the characters is rationalised, suggesting that their extraordinary abilities can be explained through realistic interpretations rather than purely mystical origins. This symbolic approach grounds the mythological narratives in the conceivable realm and transfigures the characters relatable and their capabilities potentially achievable. Amish Tripathi’s depiction of the god Shiva—aligning with Euhemerus’ theory that Gods were extraordinary humans in the past—presents him as a mortal who becomes deified due to his exceptional valour and deeds. However, Tripathi’s Shiva resonates more with Joseph Campbell’s archetype of the mythological hero. Shiva experiences divine interventions and undergoes transformative journeys that mirror the stages of the

hero's journey outlined by Campbell. Shiva, in the Shiva Trilogy, is a human being with flaws and weaknesses who is chosen by destiny to become a god-like figure. The Shiva Trilogy posits that Shiva was born as a "special" human being later to be venerated as a God. By depicting mythological characters as mortal individuals, the trilogy posits a plausible historical existence of them. Interpreting the supernatural traits and capabilities of these characters from a more logical standpoint, devoid of their divine attributes, contributes to this historical contextualisation. As Tripathi describes the facial features of Ganesh as a part of a physical genetic anomaly, a more believable narrative is at hand which is more rationally comprehensible than an individual with the head of an elephant and thus we see "backfire effect" as well as "Dunning-Kruger effect" being used very effectively. Likewise, other mythological characters including Nandi, Kali, Daksha, and Narasimha discard their supernatural features and emerge as human beings in the Shiva Trilogy.

When Amish Tripathi demystifies supernatural elements in myths and furnishes them with probable scientific and rational explanations, Ashwin Sanghi retains mysticism and supernatural elements and portrays them as the historical reality of a bygone age. *Krishna Key*, by partially rejecting Euhemerus' theory of historical interpretation of mythology, posits that the superhuman characteristics depicted in myths were indeed a reality of the past and suggests a historical basis for such extraordinary feats and abilities. This perspective reconsiders the limits of human potential and points out the possibility that ancient people may have possessed capabilities that are lost to us now. However, *Krishna Key* upholds euhemerism regarding the historicity of mythological characters and portrays lord

Krishna as a historical figure. Unlike Shiva in the Shiva Trilogy, Krishna in *Krishna Key* is a mystical, divine being who had lived among the people. Sanghi does not portray Krishna as a normal human being whom the people deified for his valour and deeds; rather, Sanghi's Krishna is an incarnation of the God Mahavishnu. Krishna in *Krishna Key* is a God who is born on earth in human form endowed with superhuman abilities, for a specific mission. Sanghi, thus, presents Krishna as a historical figure with divine powers, infusing divinity with historicity.

Anand Neelakantan's *Asura* also portrays mythological events and characters as historical occurrences and historical people. Unlike Amish Tripathi and Ashwin Sanghi, by stripping away the supernatural elements altogether, Anand Neelakantan presents superhuman characteristics of mythological characters as exaggerations of normal human traits. This demystification aligns with Euhemerus' interpretation of mythological characters and suggests that what may have been considered supernatural might be simply the result of embellished storytelling. Whereas Tripathi finds seemingly reasonable explanations for the supernatural appearance of mythological characters, Neelakantan portrays the supernatural physique of mythological characters as a result of allegorical narratives. According to him, Ravana does not literally possess ten heads, but he is called the "ten-headed" because of his personality traits. No character in *Asura* possesses superhuman abilities. Though Rama is an incarnation of the god Mahavishnu in myths, Neelakantan's Rama is an ordinary human being who neither possesses any divine capabilities nor experiences divine intervention in his life. Similar to Tripathi's Shiva, Neelakantan's Ram is also a historical figure who gets deified later in his life.

By using similar but distinct approaches, all select novels anthropomorphise mythological characters. These narrative techniques serve to bring these mythological figures closer to the human experience and replace myths from the realm of imagined tales to that of history. The process of anthropomorphising mythological characters involves attributing to them emotions, dilemmas, and values that are relatable to a modern audience. When characters such as Shiva, Sati, Ganesh, Krishna, Ravana, Rama, and Sita are depicted with human flaws and strengths, they cease to be distant deities and become historical personalities whose actions and decisions can be empathised with and learned from. When mythological tales are presented as history, they acquire an aura of authenticity and authority that can significantly influence cultural and national identity. This can be particularly potent in political or cultural discourses where origins and history are used to justify contemporary claims to land, authority, or moral high ground.

The fourth chapter, “Myth and Science: Rationalising Mythology,” demonstrates how the glorification of ancient knowledge functions as a key mechanism in the rationalisation of mythological narratives and the historicization of myths. All the select novels portray ancient Indian civilisations as repositories of advanced scientific knowledge. The *Shiva Trilogy*, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* employ scientific jargon and anachronistic projections to blend mythological storytelling with claims of historical scientific prowess. They position myths not merely as cultural and religious narratives but as potential chronicles of ancient scientific wisdom. This narrative technique, where modern scientific and technological concepts are superimposed onto ancient settings, makes the ancient world relatable

to contemporary audiences and also elevates the stature of the ancient cultures, portraying them as not just spiritually but intellectually advanced. The select mythological fictions depict myths as reservoirs of ancient scientific knowledge and present divine incidents and events in myths with scientific rationale. In a way, they seek the sanction of modern science for myths and subsequently present mythology as inherently composed of scientific temper.

The Shiva Trilogy presents the ancient age as a highly sophisticated and scientifically advanced period in history. Meluhans, according to Amish Tripathi, had exceptional medical knowledge which even surpasses modern medicine. Tripathi depicts Somras as a groundbreaking scientific discovery, capable of extending life and preventing diseases and ageing. The trilogy also emphasises the advanced weaponry of ancient people. Portraying Brahmastra and Pashupatiastra as nuclear weapons, the trilogy posits that the ancient people were even aware of nuclear energy and its use in warfare. The trilogy also provides seemingly scientific explanations for mystic capabilities in myths such as mind reading and telepathy. *Krishna Key* also portrays ancient Indians as a scientifically advanced community that was adept even in nuclear science as well as genetics. Ashwin Sanghi, just like Amish Tripathi, postulates that the ancient people were well versed in nuclear physics and they had made nuclear weapons. *Asura* also depicts the ancient Indians as a scientifically advanced society that had built an aeroplane thousands of years before the first modern aircraft. By establishing the superiority of ancient people in terms of scientific wisdom and technological development, the select novels put

forward the notion that myths could be narratives of the plausible history of the land rather than imaginary tales.

The present study identifies an attempt to historicize and rationalise myths in the select mythological fictions, which goes hand in hand with the prevalent post-truth narratives. Mythological fictions in the twenty-first century, influenced by the post-truth landscape of the nation, reflect and respond to the prevailing post-truth discourse by reinterpreting myths as historical and scientific accounts. The historical interpretation of mythology employed in the select works involves three phases: associating myths with specific historical periods, anthropomorphising mythological characters, and presenting myths as repositories of ancient scientific wisdom. All these phases are evident in the Shiva trilogy, *Krishna Key* and *Asura* even though each novel adopts varying strategies in historical interpretation of mythology.

The select novels place their characters in well-defined historical time frames by setting their background in relation to the historical Indus Valley civilisation and Vedic civilisation. While the Shiva trilogy and *Krishna Key* suggest that both Indus Valley and Vedic civilisations were one and the same and the mythological gods were a part of that glorious historical era, *Asura* maintains that both are two distinct civilisations. Hence, the Shiva trilogy and *Krishna Key*, rejecting the Aryan migration theory, maintain that the establishers of Vedic Civilisation were the native people of the land. On the other hand, *Asura*, accepting the Aryan migration theory, states that Vedic civilisation was established by migrants attacking the early Indus civilisation.

The Shiva trilogy portrays Shiva, one of the three supreme gods in Hinduism, as a human being living during the Indus Valley civilisation. Even though Amish Tripathi anthropomorphises the god Shiva in his novel, he deviates from Euhemerus' historical interpretation of mythology and does not depict Shiva as a normal human being; rather, he is a human being who experiences divine interventions in his life. Whereas in *Krishna Key*, Lord Krishna is a historical but divine incarnation with supernatural abilities. Even when presenting the myth of Krishna as a historical record, Ashwin Sanghi does not depict Krishna as a normal human being. While Euhemerus maintains that the supernatural abilities of mythological figures could be recognised as a result of exaggerated retellings, Sanghi asserts that the divine attributes of Krishna were rather a historical reality as well as a proof of his divine entity. On the other hand, Anand Neelakantan adopts euhemerism to its core and presents divine or demonic characters in mythology as normal human beings who neither experience divine interventions in their lives nor possess divinity. According to Neelakantan, the superhuman qualities and traits of Ravana, Rama and other related characters are a result of exaggeration.

By reinterpreting myths for modern readers, Tripathi, Sanghi and Neelakantan maintain that the ancient civilisations had superior scientific knowledge. The select texts employ scientific jargon to explain mythological substances such as Somras and *daivi astras*. They incorporate anachronism by redefining mythological substances and events through the lens of contemporary scientific terminology and understanding. By attributing modern scientific knowledge to mythological characters, the novels not only emphasise the wisdom of

ancient people but also propose that the scientific advancements and technologies of the contemporary era are merely rediscoveries of knowledge that was already familiar to the ancients. Conversely, through such narratives, the select novels align with the post-truth narratives, which showcase antipathy towards modern science. They, in a way, belittle modern science and the expertise of its practitioners.

Myths are intricately intertwined with the socio-cultural realms of Indian communities; they exercise a strong emotional hold over the people. By adopting the historical interpretation of mythology, the select mythological fiction of the twenty-first century, influenced by the post-truth landscape, reflects and responds to the prevailing post-truth discourse in various ways. They re-narrate myths through a more historical and rational lens, grounding them in a context that aligns with modern historical and scientific sensibilities. The reinterpretation of mythological figures and events as historical persons and occurrences in the select texts could be generalised to a great extent to other mythological novels as well.

Recommendations

This thesis will work as a foundational platform for forthcoming research endeavours by initiating a discussion on the significance of mythological fiction and the post-truth discourse. This study offers a comprehensive analysis of the select works, yet there remain significant prospects for further studies. The select fictional works for this thesis include the Shiva Trilogy (2010-2013) written by Amish Tripathi, *The Krishna Key* (2012) by Ashwin Sanghi and *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished—The Story of Ravana and His People* (2011) by Anand Neelakantan. Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy comprises *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). Future research can expand the corpus to include a wider range of mythological fictions. This will provide more comprehensive understanding of how different authors and narratives reflect and respond in the post-truth era.

By examining a broader spectrum of texts, researchers can uncover additional patterns and themes and contribute to a more nuanced discourse analysis. Future studies can also explore the intention of authors and the reception of these works by diverse audiences. Understanding the motivations behind the retelling of myths in the post-truth era can shed light on how these narratives are constructed. Similarly, examining how different demographic groups interpret and respond to these stories can provide insight into the broader cultural and political implications of mythological fiction.

In addition to the above, incorporating literature from regional languages can significantly enrich future research. By including regional literature, a more diverse perspective on how post-truth narratives are constructed and disseminated across different cultural contexts can be studied. This inclusion can help identify regional variations in the depiction of myth and history, and how these narratives resonate with local audiences. Examining works in regional languages can also highlight how regional cultures and histories interact with and challenge dominant narratives, providing a more holistic view of the literary landscape in the post-truth era. Furthermore, expanding the research scope to include other literary genres beyond mythological fiction can provide a more comprehensive analysis and a deep understanding of how various forms of literature engage with post-truth discourse. By examining genres such as historical fiction, science fiction, and social fiction, researchers can explore a wider range of narrative strategies and thematic concerns.

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