

Exploration of the Indian Ethos in Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata*

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Abstract

The Indian culture is revealed in religions, scriptures, mythologies, and puranas. The mythologies are not mere tales of Gods but they consist of great values and notions in them. One can adopt to the ethos of culture to make his or her life better. The mythological stories effectively convey the essential message to people and guide them towards a peaceful and prosperous life. Indians especially Hindus consider that following their religion could provide a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. The spiritual values are essential for one's liberation from the worldly entanglements and wellbeing of the soul, mind and body. Devdutt Pattanaik is an Indian mythologist, speaker, illustrator, columnist and an author of more than fifty books. Some of his important works are *My Gita, Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata*, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata*, and *Yama and his Book of Accounts*. His works deal with the fields of religion, mythology and management. The present study aims at an analysis of the mythological retelling of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata* so as to bring out his understanding of the world with reference to Indian ethos. *Shyam* is a retelling of the *Bhagavata Purana* with illustrations which incorporates tales from various regional and folk versions of the epic. The *Bhagavata Purana*, also known as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, is one of Hinduism's eighteen great puranas. It is composed in Sanskrit and traditionally attributed to Veda Vyasa which promotes devotion towards Lord Krishna. *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata* narrates the life history of Lord Krishna in sixteen chapters. Through these tales of Lord Krishna, the author provides great insights about life which enable the people to lead a happier life. Though Krishna is a divine manifestation of Lord Vishnu in human form (avathar), like human beings, he also has experienced all the emotions such as grief, loss, love and so on. Anyhow, he has led a better life due to his awareness about the nature of life and the functioning of universe.

Keywords: Indian Culture, Ethos, *Bhagavata Purana*, Retelling, Mythology, Krishna, Ultimate Reality, Insight, Life, and World.

In India, every religion and philosophical system has strong ethical elements. Indian ethics are based on the principles of compassion, love, upholding dharma, gratitude, awareness of reality, goodwill towards all living beings and so on. Indian ethos is a set of values and ethics that have evolved from Indian culture. The *Vedas*, the Puranas and the holy books, all present moral values and obligations that a human being has to fulfill in order to lead a contented life. The mythologies are not mere tales of Gods but they consist of great values and notions in them. One can adopt to the ethos of culture to make his or her life worthy. The mythological stories effectively convey the essential message to people and guide them towards a peaceful and prosperous life. Indians especially Hindus consider that following their religion could provide a sense of meaning and purpose to their lives. The spiritual values are essential for one's liberation from the worldly entanglements and wellbeing of the soul, mind and body. Devdutt Pattanaik is an Indian mythologist, speaker, illustrator, columnist and an author of more than fifty books. Some of his important works are *My Gita, Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata*, *Ramayana Versus Mahabharata*, and *Yama and his Book of Accounts*. His works deal with the fields of religion, mythology and management. The present study aims at an analysis of the mythological retelling of Devdutt Pattanaik's *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata* so as to bring out his understanding of the world with reference to Indian ethos. *Shyam* is a retelling of the *Bhagavata Purana* with illustrations which incorporates tales from various regional and folk versions of the epic. The *Bhagavata Purana*, also known as the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, is one of Hinduism's eighteen great puranas. It is composed in Sanskrit and traditionally attributed to Veda Vyasa and it promotes devotion towards Lord Krishna. *Shyam: An Illustrated Retelling of the Bhagavata* narrates the life history of Lord Krishna in sixteen chapters. Through these tales of Lord Krishna, the author provides great insights about life which enable the people to lead a happier life. Though Krishna is a divine manifestation of Lord Vishnu in human form (avathar), like human beings, he also has experienced all the emotions such as grief, loss, love and so on. Anyhow, he has led a better life due to his awareness about the nature of life and the functioning of universe.

The story begins with the prologue "Shuka embraces Life" in which Shuka, son of Vyasa, leaps out of the mother's womb as a new born child. When he has been in the mother's womb, he has listened to the chanting of the *Vedas* and acquired wisdom from them. He feels that the *Vedas* have liberated him from the illusions of the world. Hence, he thinks that there is no meaning in leading a worldly life on the earth. He tries to move upward to the heaven. His father, Vyasa, questions him that if he does not live and die, then how can he experience the beauty of life. His father narrates the life history of

Shyam alias Lord Krishna to make his son know how a person can live happier amidst the trials and tribulations of life. The narration revolves around Shyam's birth, growth, love life, feats, hardships, new kingdom, marriage, curse, and death. After hearing the tale, Shuka understands the nature of the world and its functions. As he is impressed by the story, he tells it to those who need comfort. He has repeated it to King Parikshit, the grandson of Arjuna, in his death bed when he needs comfort and solace. The story of Shyam has inspired Shuka to live and experience the earthly life. The ethical elements in the tale have provided enlightenment and comfort to those who are in despair.

Ethics and moral values are embedded in the *Bhagavata Purana*. They include core values such as how to live a compassionate life without judging others, true love, leading life without expectations, acceptance of reality, being grateful, upholding dharma and so on. In the retelling, several incidents display the Indian ethos which are important for one's life. For instance, Shyam plays the flute and cows are gathered by his music. When Nanda, father of Shyam, asks him how he has learned to play the flute, he replies, "there is music everywhere: in our breath, in our heart, in the river, in the wind, in the tress, in the grinding stone, in the butter churn, in footsteps, in birdsong. What is there to learn?" (74) Shyam humbly says that everyone can learn it since music exists everywhere and only sensible perception is needed to learn it. This incident implies Shyam's insistence on observing and appreciating every aspect in the world. Having adoration for everything is significant because it makes people to see good in everything.

Another incident tells how to be non-judgemental by developing compassion towards others. Once, Nanda is attacked by a snake and the neighbours attempt to rescue him by beating it with sticks, but he is not freed from the clutches of the snake. When Shyam touches the serpent and it immediately releases him. The snake is transformed into a Vidyadhara, a supernatural being with magical powers. The snake has been given a curse that he will turn into a beast for interrupting a sage's meditation and he will be liberated from his curse, when Shyam touches him. Nanda advises his sons Balarama and Shyam:

All villains are essentially victims, my sons, if only hear their story. The horrid Kamsa of Mathura was a child born of rape, cursed by his own mother who killed herself rather than raise him. The tyrant Jarasandha of Magadha was cast out at birth, as he was thought be dead....They will always see the world as a threat....You must never see the world as a threat. More importantly, you must never make the world a threat for others. (84)

He says that the evil people seem to be victims who might have suffered from trauma. It can be known only if their stories are heard. As a result, people tend to view the world negatively. He counsels that his sons should always develop an optimistic attitude towards life. At any cost, they should not do any harm to others and they must be kind towards fellow people and they should protect them. This incident reveals one of the fundamental ethics of being compassionate rather than being judgemental. Judging people and labelling them as good or bad without thinking in their point of view is a terrible vice and it can be avoided.

Another episode illustrates the concept of true love through Shyam and Radha. Radha is one of the gopis (milkmaids) in the village of Vrindhavan and the beloved of Shyam. They always think of each other. They admire and adore each other. When the friends of both Shyam and Radha have asked them what they want from each other, they reply that they exist for each other and fulfil the needs of each other without seeking anything in return. Their friends ask: "What do you want from her?" asked the boys. "Want Nothing," he said. "I merely desire to be the vessel who receives what she gives. What do you want from him?" asked the girls. "Want? Nothing," she replied. "I just want to be the tree that gives him what he seeks" (100). This episode provides enlightenment about true love. As human beings are blinded by false ego, they fail to see others. Hence, they always expect to receive without giving. Love between Radha and Shyam inspires people to love truly without expecting anything in return. True love is about only giving without expecting anything in return.

Another sequence explicates the importance of being grateful. A Yadava nobleman, Satrajit keeps a precious jewel of great fortune named Syamantaka with him. Shyam insists that such magnificent jewel should be kept with the Yadava council so that the fortune can be enjoyed by the entire community, but Satrajit disagrees with Shyam. One day, Satrajit's brother Prasanjit takes the jewel and goes to the forest and dies there. The jewel goes missing. Immediately, the Yadava people suspect Shyam that he might have stolen it. Satrajit accuses, "this vile cowherd who stole butter and other men's wives has now murdered my brother and stolen the jewel he so craved" (156). The accusation is made due to the false belief of people. Since Shyam was once a thief of butter and clothes, he also would have stolen the precious thing. Shyam tries to find out the truth behind the missing jewel. He discovers that a lion has attacked Prasanjit and a bear has taken the jewel and Shyam comes with it. Hence, Satrajit gives his daughter Satyabama in marriage to Shyam. Akrura, another Yadava, who is in love with Satyabama despises Shyam and steals the jewel and moves to Kashi. Since the jewel has been stolen, the fortune of the Yadava clan is diminished; people have suffered from epidemics, and natural disasters. Again, the Yadava community blames Shyam for the consequences, "If Shyam had not married Satyabhama, Satrajit would not have been killed and the Syamantaka would still be with us" (159). Krishna has gone to Kashi and brought Akrura back and has made him to realise his mistake. The Yadava people have no gratitude for Shyam. They have forgotten the selfless help of Shyam. He has protected the people from the attacks of Jarasandha for seventeen times. He has built an entire city called Dwaravati with divine powers for the protection of his people. The Yadavas have accused Shyam for the unpleasant circumstances. Forgetting one's help is quite unethical. Thiruvalluvar, the Indian poet and Philosopher has mentioned that

ingratitude is a great sin in one of his verses in *Thirukural*: “Ennandri Kondraarkum uyvuntaam uyvillai / Seynnandri kondra makarku.” (Chapter 11, Kural 110) G. U. Pope translates it: “who every good have killed, may yet destruction flee; who ‘benefit’ has killed, that man shall never scape free!” One can forget all the virtues of his life but one should not let go of the gratitude for the help he has received. This sequence has established that one of the prominent ethical values is gratitude. Human beings should always remain grateful to the patrons who have helped them.

Gandhari has lost all her hundred sons in the Kurukshetra war. Unable to bear her grief, she curses Shyam that he will witness the destruction of his entire Yadava clan and he also will die. Shyam shows his calm gesture, “He embraced the mother of the fallen Kauravas and absorbed all the venom, till his dark skin became darker” (243). Shyam does not get furious by her behaviour, rather, he feels her pain of losing children. This episode explicates that Karma plays its role perfectly irrespective of whoever the doer is. Though Shyam has given justice to Pandavas, he is bound to accept Gandhari’s curse. Shyam understands that this is how the world functions and accepts it with a smile. Every action whether it’s good or bad bears the consequences. This is the Universal law on which the world functions. Acceptance of this truth will make the human beings to lead their lives in the righteous path. Thus, the retelling of the epic provides values and ethics which are essential for the betterment of one’s life. Devdutt Pattanaik has delineated vividly to the readers about the Indian ethos. He has mentioned the several aspects of core ethical values such as acceptance and understanding of the reality, being grateful, having adoration for everything, loving truly, and upholding dharma (goodness).

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