

# big picture

A CLOSE LOOK AT ISSUES THAT MATTER

# MYTHS WITH A MAKEOVER

## TWISTED TURN

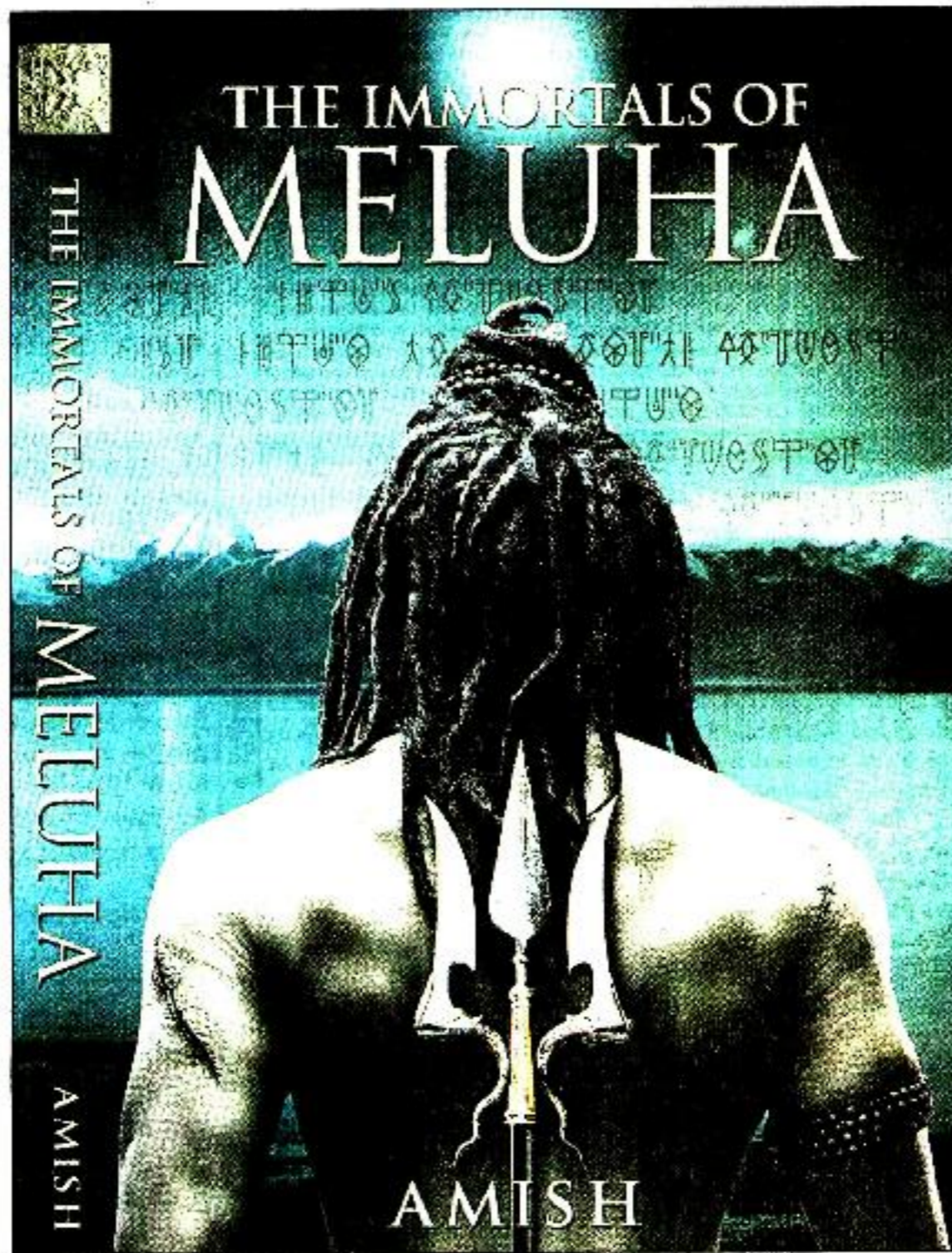
Book lovers in India lap up mythological tales with modern as well as imaginative retelling

Sankalp Phartiyal

**M**riganka Dadwal knows everything about the Ramayana, the ancient Hindu epic that tells the story of warrior-god Rama and the abduction of his wife Sita by the powerful demon king Ravana. But the journalist-turned-entrepreneur says she would love to read the epic from the point of view of the vanquished Ravana — and now she can.

With several mythological tales getting a modern makeover and imaginative retellings crowding bookshelves, Dadwal and millions of other urban, educated Indians who prefer to read in English have more choices than ever before. The trend spells good times for bestselling Indian writers such as Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi and Ashok Banker, who are wooing readers with characters cast in a human mould amid a masterful weaving of mythology and suspense.

"They talk about Indian mythology, they talk about stuff which has hitherto been unheard of," says Dadwal, 32. "It's different from the palette which was already available." Vernacular writers had recast myths before, but the Indian publishing industry was sceptical of the demand for such fiction in English. Like Harry Potter author JK Rowling, Tripathi was rejected by a series of publishers before finding unexpected success with the first book of his Shiva trilogy, which recounts the exploits of the



■ The Immortals of Meluha became a publishing phenomenon in 2010

FILE PHOTO

Hindu deity of destruction.

The Immortals of Meluha became a publishing phenomenon in 2010 and spawned two sequels. The trilogy sold more

than 1.5 million copies in a country where a print run of a few thousand copies is good enough to be considered a bestseller, and a Bollywood adaptation is also in the pipe-

line. Not surprisingly, the banker-turned-author was offered a million-dollar advance this year for a new series, and he hasn't even finalised the topic yet.

"(The growth of the genre) is a result of our increasing self-confidence as a nation," the 38-year-old Tripathi said. "The English publishing industry itself was perhaps more geared towards catering to the Western market, explaining India to the Western market, rather than finding topics which sell in the India market," he added.

Bookstore owners in India are increasingly lining their shelves with mythological thrillers in attractive, inexpensive paperbacks that are introduced with much fanfare. Tripathi's latest book launch featured an original soundtrack, and promotions on social media have boosted sales. Oxford Bookstore, which has a presence in nine

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Indian cities, is planning to add a section on retellings of Indian mythology. "This is a bang-on genre, we shouldn't miss it," says Swagat Sengupta, country head of its operations and purchasing department. "And nobody should miss it actually."

There are still plenty of readers who are not paying heed — such as Nupur Sood, a 35-year-old banker, who says that retelling and repackaging myths doesn't make sense because she prefers to read something new. "It forcefully makes me draw comparisons to what I already know," says Sood.

Author Sanghi, whose three novels have sold more than 450,000 copies, also sounds a note of caution, saying there's a glut of mythological fiction in Indian publishing.

REUTERS