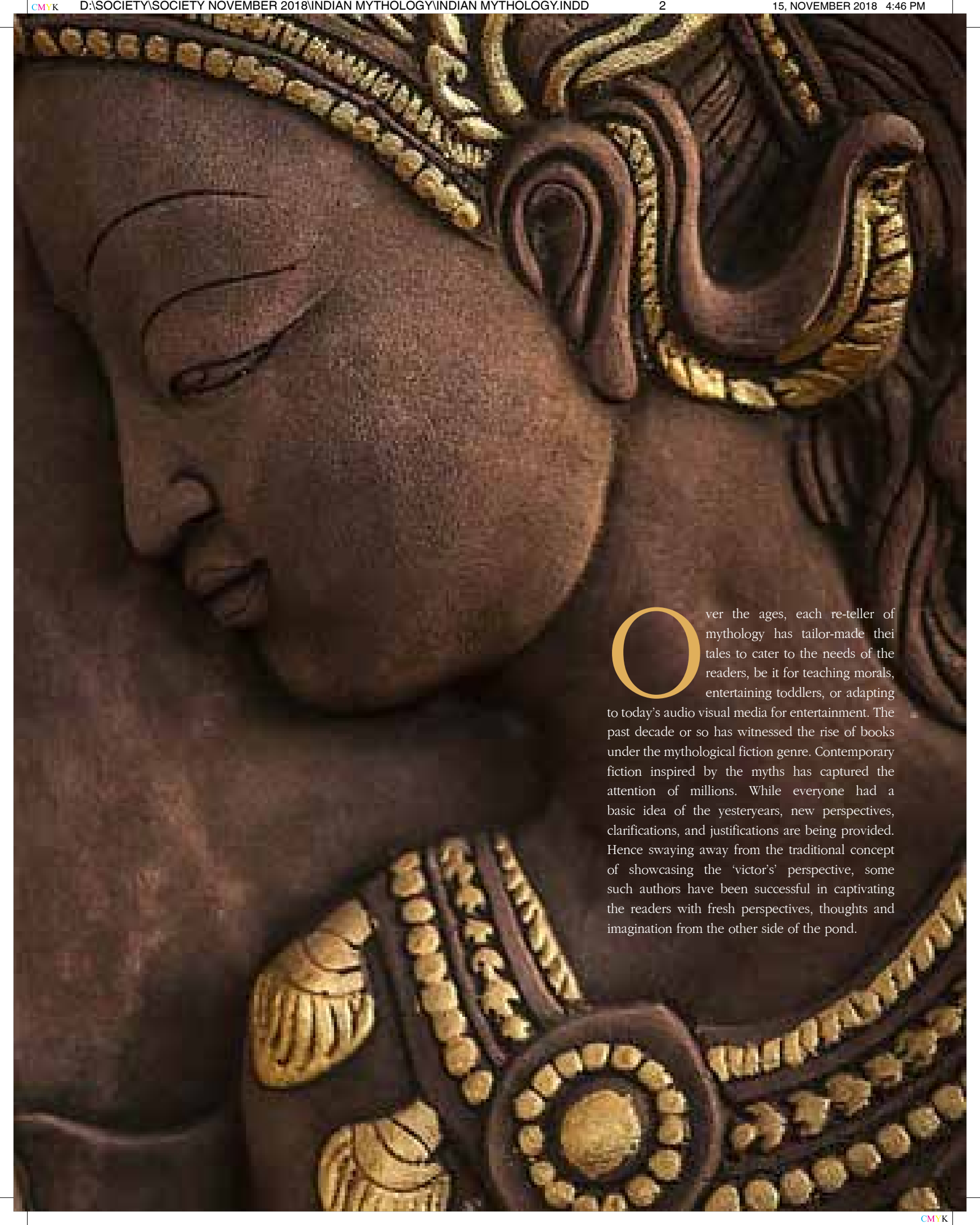


Is there truth to the myths that fascinate us so much? Do new-age books change our perceptions regarding mythology? *Society* interacts with authors writing on Indian mythology to unearth such new outlooks including creating space for this kind of writing and handling the genre the right way.

| By VANI KRISHNAN |



the retellers of myth



Over the ages, each re-teller of mythology has tailor-made their tales to cater to the needs of the readers, be it for teaching morals, entertaining toddlers, or adapting to today's audio visual media for entertainment. The past decade or so has witnessed the rise of books under the mythological fiction genre. Contemporary fiction inspired by the myths has captured the attention of millions. While everyone had a basic idea of the yesteryears, new perspectives, clarifications, and justifications are being provided. Hence swaying away from the traditional concept of showcasing the 'victor's' perspective, some such authors have been successful in captivating the readers with fresh perspectives, thoughts and imagination from the other side of the pond.

The making of any author originates from a nascent stage of their childhood, from the tales told by one's ancestors, various places one visits to the books one voraciously reads. For instance the moulding of the author in Ashok Banker started from tender age of five. By the age of 9, he had decided on becoming a writer and had read his way through all the western myths as well as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in abridged forms. "We had a complete set of encyclopaedias called *The Book of Knowledge*. I devoured them eagerly. My favourite sections were the ones on mythology. They were not only Greek, Roman, Egyptian or Norse, but there were also articles on Asian and even Indian myths. I was fascinated by them," recollected Banker. By age 12, he knew he would be a writer who focussed on writing massive epic story cycles reminiscent of the ancient classics in his own versions.

Similar was the inception of the writer in Anand Neelkantan, the author of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished*, *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* and *The Rise of Sivagami*. Growing up on the outskirts of Cochin, the ancient city's culture influenced him profusely. The temples surrounding the area and the classical and folk art forms were a part of life. He noticed that all these classical art forms had a subaltern angle. Even though played in the temple, the characters always had shades of grey. "They had a voice. Ravana, Duryodhana, and Bali had a voice in various forms."

As an individual wanting to write on mythology, he thought there was no point in pursuing it from the usual angle.



Writing *Ramayana* from Ram's angle was fruitless as many others including the great saints like Valmiki and Tulsidas have the conventional telling. "That is why I chose to write from Ravana's perspective in *Asura* and Duryodhana's perspective in *Ajaya*. And *Vanara* talks about other vanquished heroes such as Bali and Sugreev."

The conventional Indian stories told to toddlers explores mythology from a black and white perspective. Stressing on the virtuous and the evil, one doesn't focus on the real aim of these ancient scripts. Indian mythology is mostly concerned with subjective truth with focus being how you interpret the events rather than the sequence of events. Novelist CS Lewis

rightly said that a myth is a lie that reveals a truth. On questioning author Ashwin Sanghi about actuality and perceptions, he replies, "The delicious question is 'What if?'. What if Rama, Krishna, Shiva or Ganesha were real people or historical characters, who began to be worshipped because of their great deeds? I remember visiting a temple in Kolkata where Amitabh Bachchan is worshipped as a god. Isn't it possible that our deities started out like that? Some people ask me why mythology fascinates me. The truth is that it doesn't. It is the overlap of two words 'myth' and 'history' that results in a new word 'mystery'. That's what fascinates me. All mythology contains a central kernel of truth."



The ability to think out-of-the-box is what these writers have achieved. It all depends on the perception the reader views the event to be. For instance, one might perceive the Pandavas in the epic *Mahabharata* to be the victors, but others might feel with nothing left after the destruction the war had caused, did they really emerge victorious?

Kavita Kane, an acclaimed journalist turned author of books like *Karna's wife*, *Sita's Sister*, *Menaka's Choice*, *Lanka's Princess* and *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* adds, "The genre encourages different perspectives and that is why we have so many versions of the original text of the epics through the centuries. Our mythology is dynamic, palpable and living – essentially because of such revised perspectives which constantly question the moral, socio-political and philosophical ethos of those and current times. For instance, the Shakuntala of the original *Mahabharata* is more feisty and independent than Kalidas' *Shakuntala* and our mythology allows us to see and compare these differences through the works of writers and other creative artists."

In her books, she has highlighted perspectives of marginalised characters. *Karna's Wife* narrates Karna's story through his wife's eyes. *Sita's Sister* is about Urmila, one of the most overlooked characters in the *Ramayana*. The Menaka of *Menaka's Choice* is an *apsara* – celestial beauties we know minimal about. She destroyed the man she loved and yet was the reason for his resuscitated glory. Surpanakha



of *Lanka's Princess* is one of the most revulsed antagonists and yet one of the most misunderstood characters of the epic, neither a vamp nor a victim. *Mahabharata's* Satyawati was the most political person if you consider the epic as a political drama and the book's title – *The Fisher Queen's Dynasty* talks of her dynasty, not the king's. Seeing these minor characters in a different perspective changes the narrative.

These authors have undergone multiple

struggles to win the reader's hearts. Ashwin's first book *The Rozabal Line* got completed in 2005 but found a publisher only in 2008. The publishing industry was just not ready for experimental genres like theological or mythological fiction. But in the wide arena of Indian fiction, there was no dearth of success stories in the international market. Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, and Vikram Seth were some examples.

"The problem lay in commercial fiction. This was a segment that was never encouraged by publishers in India, partly due to the fact that they were happy selling books by foreign authors in the Indian market. It took the last decade to create space for Indian commercial fiction authors in India. It may possibly take another decade to create space for them internationally," Ashwin confessed.

While the publishing aspects pose a major problem in the Indian market,



another struggle which Anand highlights is the difficulty to imagine events in the perception of the antagonist. Unless one becomes the character, he cannot think in that aspect. For instance, one has been conditioned to think of Ravana and



Duryodhana as evil. So to explore their mindset and then write is a difficult task.

On questioning of the encounter of every author's nightmare, the writer's block, the response was fairly negative. Banker explains how the river of ideas, words, stories, details, inspiration flow through him constantly. "The idea of writer's block is anathema to me. It's more a question of how to stop myself, when and where to stop," he asserts. Having put himself in the 'zone' decades ago, his entire routine and regime is designed to help him detach himself from the writing and make sure he takes enough breaks and make time for self-care. "Working from home with the constant hullabaloo of children growing up and dogs barking and a casual, house-husband, and caregiver lifestyle has helped a lot."

Another problem which these authors might encounter is the scarcity of research

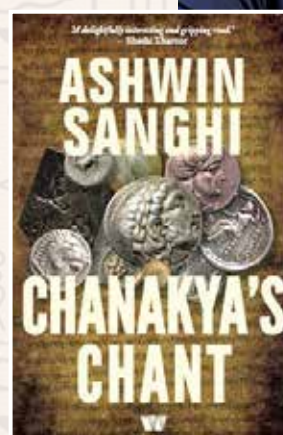
material and the extents one might have to go for it. It is a procedure of constant travel, reading and exploring. Ashwin reveals that he spent several months on research. For a typical *Bharat* series book, this could be 6-12 months. The nature of the research varies according to the book. "*Chanakya's Chant* simply involved multiple readings of the *Arthashastra* and the *Mudraraksasa*. *The Krishna Key* involved travel to Mathura, Dwarka, and Somnath. *The Sialkot Saga* involved interviewing people who had lived through Calcutta and Bombay of the fifties and sixties. *Keepers of the Kalachakra* involved teaching myself quantum theory."

He then spent three months on the plot which will usually contains every twist and turn planned chapter-wise. "It is only after these 2 stages that I start writing. Detailed plotting ensures that I do not allow the pace to slacken except of my own choosing. I am not a great writer but I am a decent rewriter, so I rewrite the manuscript several times before it goes in for editing. All in all, 2 years is the average from beginning to end. The most difficult part of this process is blending fact and fiction. Too much fact and the pace slackens, too much fiction and it doesn't feel real."

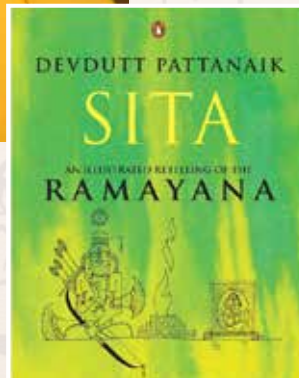
For other rewriters, the problem was that the texts available were written in the conventional manner. Authors like Kavita and Anand had to base their books on the events surrounding the traditional protagonists. Having written multiple versions of *Ramayana* and *Mababbarata*, Anand has always tried to stick to some of the texts. Being a perspective literature, he doesn't base it in some other era or come up with his own theories. Rather by changing

the narrative, he utilises the conventional texts. Narrating the same incidents from the opposite side is a tougher task because it has to be convincing. "I have to convince the readers that maybe this also could have been true. This is not an attempt stating 'This is the truth'. I am trying to convince the readers that perhaps *Ramayana* could have happened in this manner. *Mababbarata* could have happened like how I have portrayed in *Ajaya*. Perhaps this was what *Bali* thought during the time Kishkinda, the Vanara kingdom was built. My writing is similar to a historical fiction rather than a mythological fiction even though I use mythological subjects."

The difference between historical and mythological fiction is very subtle. History mainly focuses on evidence of the given matter; whereas mythological fiction revolves around the belief of a particular aspect. Hence the scope of this genre can be foreseen to be humungous. The same when dissected into various theories, notions,



and perceptions, one can derive practical lessons which are even applicable in the current day. In words of Devdutt Pattanaik, "When put in frameworks you start classifying, it helps to open



your mind up. Otherwise the *kathas* disappears in forms of entertainment and conversations and nobody quite catches the magic of it. So when you put it down in a framework you start to understand the framework behind it.”

The main objective of epics is not to narrate mere stories. It is to impart the knowledge of virtues and morals. They pose to be lessons which assist in solving multiple practical problems in the present day. Books such as *Leader* by Devdutt Pattanaik provide 50 insights of mythology stressing on effective leadership, communication skills, and striking the chord between discipline and leniency. These books depict how Indian mythology has been relevant to us from thousands of years and eons to come.

The stark difference between Indian mythology and others is that Indian mythology has been evolving for the last thousands of years. “It is a living religion,” adds Anand. “Further other branches like Buddhism and Sikhism are also living religions. The texts in Greek mythology stay. *Ramayana* and the *Mababbarata* narration evolves every time a new book is written, the stories are expanding. Only the living

evolves whereas the dead stays there. So Indian *kathas*, *puranas*, and *itihisas* are evolving stories. They have been written, re-written, interpreted and re-interpreted. They are seen from all angles. Only this will result further to serve humanity, like how they’ve served mankind for the last thousands of years.”

Not just that! According to Ashwin, one more significant difference is that Indian myths unlike Greek or Roman ones are inextricably linked to religious beliefs and are also a valuable source of philosophical thought. Another great difference is the view on life. Greeks seem to believe in just one life, while Hindu mythology celebrates many lives through karma.

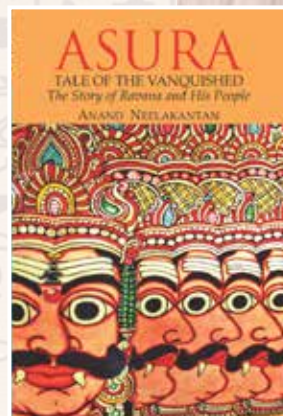
While Indian mythology is considered to be at great levels in this aspect, a limitation which is observed by Banker is that it lacks the non-fiction and expansive books that explore different aspects of myths and deities from an intelligent, rational and open-minded perspective. These are essential to keep the genre vital and progressive.

“Too often, I see the same basic books and stories churned out like soap. Devdutt Pattanaik is a master of that area and his work is commendable. But we need many more writers who go far beyond such basic studies and use rigorous intellectual and journalistic tools to explore the deeper, wider aspects of Hindu mythology,” he adds.

With the extensiveness and the wide scope of this genre, authors fear that people start to write under the genre merely by witnessing the success rate. If writers undertake the work without requisite research, it might besmirk the genre’s authenticity. “You owe it to your

reader to invest time in research. There is too much of slipshod research these days in the world of mytho-fiction simply because it happens to be a trend,” said Ashwin.

Banker too thinks the same. “Indian publishers have simply followed in the path of the successful pioneers of the genre and are churning out me-too imitations. They are signing up every new author of mythology and putting out every title imaginable. This is all right for those publishing houses that lack vision or editorial talent. But it’s a mistake. They are saturating the market and disappointing readers with shoddy work, badly edited books, and too much ‘product’. Mythology books are starting to become dime a dozen, which is a bad thing. It’s time to reinvent the genre, innovate and



bring out new perspectives, attempt new subjects or even old subjects in new ways. Find the one book you can’t live without writing. Write that one instead.”

The rephrasing of mythological characters when backed up by intense research, provides the readers with a genre which makes them contemplate over the traditional mythological characters. Let it march on. **S**