

## **Amish Tripathi's *Immortal India*: A Critique on Ancient and Modern Indian Culture**

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### **Abstract:**

*Amish Tripathi is one of the most authoritative voices of the new India that has innovatively interpreted Indian culture, myths and history. He is accountable for attracting the young generation towards religious literature and consequently compelling jeans clad youngsters to chant ancient mantras, Har-Har Mahadev and Jai Shree Ram.*

*Tripathi explores the view that cultures and their narratives are intimately allied with that of the foundational myths: the stories which locate the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not "real," but "mythic" time. Invented traditions make the confusions and disasters of history intelligible. Myths of origin also help disenfranchised peoples to express their resentment and its contents in intelligible terms. Tripathi tries to find out answers to these queries under the scanner of Indian culture including all the issues facing modern India. India, though got independence in 1947, has had the roots of established civilization for centuries.*

*The paper is an endeavour to evaluate the modern view point of Indian culture with its current modifications through an analytical study of his *Immortal India*. It also aims to analyse how Amish unifies the present sensibilities of modern generation with that of his Indian historic past by capturing the best of the cultural tinge to suit the present Indians.*

**Key Words:** *Culture, myths, traditions, history, religion, karmas.*

## **Amish Tripathi's *Immortal India*: A Critique on Ancient and Modern Indian Culture**

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Amish Tripathi (b.1974), one of the most authoritative voices of the new India has innovatively interpreted Indian culture, myths and history. He is accountable for attracting the young generation towards religious literature and consequently compelling jeans clad youngsters to chant ancient mantras, Har-Har Mahadev and Jai Shree Ram. He boldly comments on the contemporary socio-cultural issues as noted columnist and television journalist Vir Sanghvi terms Amish as “One of India’s best storytellers looks at today’s burning issues and clarifies the arguments by blending reason and history...” Thoroughly imbedded in Indian culture, Amish acknowledges, “India, my country, and the land of my karma. I am defined to a great degree by my Indian heritage. My thoughts, my values, my way of life, are moulded by the culture and the heritage of my land.” (Acknowledgements, *Immortal India*).

Tripathi's *Immortal India* presents an exhaustive expertise of issues such as religion, mythology, tradition, history, current socio-political issues and ethics. He lays out the vast landscape of ancient Indian culture with fascinating modern perspective. His passion for Indian culture is idiosyncratic as he firmly believes that Indian culture is eternal. It witnesses the fact that Indian culture was maneuvered focusing at the mingling of wisdom and suppleness to regulate and adopt newness as well as maintain its age-old identity. This obviously makes it strongly sustainable as it has survived despite numerous violent and intellectual assaults. Amish explores the view that Indian culture is established on the strong foundations of ancient rich concepts directly derived from the Vedas. It is further refined by many outside interactions. Because of its accretive nature, it always assimilated new reforms and enriched itself. This obviously enralls Tripathi and his quest in Indian culture categorically resonates in:

What is it that makes India special? What is it about our ancient culture that still animates how we live today? What can we learn from our ancestors? And equally importantly, in what way can we be critical of our ancestors? (Introduction Immortal India, xxv)

Tripathi tries to find out answers to these queries under the scanner of Indian culture including all the issues facing modern India. India, though got independence in 1947, has had the roots of established civilization for centuries.

He unifies the present sensibilities of modern generation with that of his Indian historic past. In a way, he endeavours to capture the best of the cultural tinge to suit the present Indians. Amish states unanimous fact that the Vedas, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have strengthened national integration and multi-cultured perspective. These grand scriptures have had an enormous influence on Indian culture, literature and thought at regional as well as national level. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata had been colossally longer than the works that the modest Homer could manage. Bhagavad Gita, a small section of the Mahabharata presents before the whole world a tussle of life- doing one's duty, and focus on avoiding bad consequences.

Amish explores the view that besides Hinduism, India has been an abode of other religions too. However, this diverged religious temperament of Indian mind irrespective of any faith has been engrossed in seeking an analysis of the world through a sense of perception and interpretation. This readily prepares an indian to welcome a confluence of diverse languages and literatures as it is a country where the cultural root is so strong and varied that even students from the far-off countries used to pursue education at prestigious Nalanda and Taxila.

The exploration of the lived experiences of everyday life, rituals, family structures, courtship patterns, gift relationships, the transition from childhood to adulthood and old age and thus recognition of the rules of conduct of our own experiences are equally crucial in cultural investigation. According to Raymond Williams (1983), culture is one of the central 'keywords' in human knowledge generally, as well as in social sciences. It is not only that most of the central arguments and concepts through which we make sense of the world are located within socially and historically located cultures, but the very idea of 'culture' is situated as well. Williams' views about culture comprise three basic things- culture as the ideal which is an embodiment of

perfect and universal values, culture as documentary in which human thought, language, form, convention and experiences are compiled and finally culture as a social tool while Richard Hoggart emphasizes on the 'ways of feeling and thinking' expressed within cultural institutions.

The presentation of Gods or mythological characters just like ordinary human beings facing the worldly ebbs and flows is the hallmark of Tripathi which gives an innovative stroke to his oeuvre. He firmly asserts, "I believe that our Gods existed. I believe that they were our ancestors. I believe their blood flows in our veins. Therefore, I obviously believe that Lord Ram existed. I believe that the Ramayan, or some events similar to it, did happen" (Immortal India, 31). He wonderfully intermingles Shiva as a man. This humanizing of Lord Shiva is in the tradition of Indian cultural identity where gods have been depicted as human beings leading worldly life on this earth. Lord Rama and Krishna too have risen to the status of Gods or even Gods of Gods- Mahadeva as in case of Shiva through their great actions or Karmas. Through humanizing concept of God people especially in India search their identity. They identify themselves with particular forms of God as their choice and conduct accordingly. Though Tripathi does not claim credit for this concept, he humbly acknowledges in an interview in Swarajya Magazine:

It has always existed in our culture. There are many concepts of God in the ancient Indian way. There is the *nirgun niraakaar* concept, called Brahman in ancient times. There is the *sagun, aakar* concept, where God takes a form to come closer to us. There is the avatar concept, where God is born on Earth, completes His/ Her karma and goes back. And there is the concept where a human becomes a God. I find this last concept inspiring since it means that all of us have God within us, and it's up to us to discover the God within. (Antara Das)

Amish doesn't believe in symbolic gods rather he is of the view that God is omnipresent and He does exist all around us. He speaks to us all the time. What one needs to do is- decoding the inner voice to identify himself. Man should constantly interpret his inner voice- the call of *antaratma* to solve the worldly affairs, however entangled they appear to be. He believes that one should explore his inner potential and sense the injustice in all situations and counter it somehow to

achieve the prime state of humanity. This very action of Shiva becomes the tradition of Indian cultural identity as Dr. Radhakrishnan states:

Among the relics of the Indian civilization are found figures which are the prototype of Shiva, suggesting that he who explores his inward nature and integrates it is the ideal man. This image has haunted the spiritual landscape of this country from those early times till today. (Religion and Culture, 11)

Tripathi, thus, believes that God relates to the Self and it was the universal purpose of ancient religion where everyone was supposed to raise his inner talent to such a great degree that inner divinity may be witnessed. However, this instinctively generates a kind of lackadaisical attitude for religion which is very popular amongst the youth who don't like to talk much about religion. Tripathi applauds this stance:

In ancient India, we had various Schools of Philosophy, darshana. Of these schools, some were devoted to the path of atheists. It's better to be good atheist doing good karma, as compared to a religious extremist doing bad karma." (Immortal India, 47)

Tripathi, in a way makes a fervent appeal here against fanaticism and he propagates a kind of liberalism in modern theology and indigenous culture, redeeming it all kinds of rigidity and hypocrisy. This is indispensable for modern India with all her diverged ethnic groups. Moreover, this inevitably gives new dimensions to Indian cultural identity which is quite suitable for globalised milieu.

In the Hindu mythology Karma facilitates a system of actions and reactions which paves way for the reincarnation of jiva or soul. Tripathi gives a modern touch to the theory of karma by declaring that the present life is important and one should do his duties in this life with utmost sincerity. He emphasizes that there is nothing like past life sins. He elucidates that when one commits bad karma in this life or does something not in line with *swadharma*, karma reciprocates. This simply teaches that man should not deport himself from this world as a penalty rather stay here and do some Good, so that he can purify his karma. Tripathi cites the logic of karma in ancient Indian Paradigm of charity where man carries the credence of his own karma.

He suggests that charity balances karma account of an individual. “So, in the Indic approach, the giver of charity is the actual beneficiary of an act of charity” (Immortal India, 104). Dr. Radhakrishnan has also the identical observation:

The law of Karma encourages the sinner that it is never too late to mend. It does not shut the gates of hope against despair and suffering, guilt and peril. It persuades us to adopt a charitable view towards the sinner, for men are more often weak than vicious.” (The Hindu View of Life, 52)

Tripathi believes that bad karma generates evil which is eternal and cannot be destroyed absolutely. He asserts that this process of good and evil goes on naturally till the culmination of anyone. More explicitly he clarifies:

In the traditional Indian concept, there is no pure good or pure evil; it did not exist at all. In ancient Sanskrit, there is no exact translation for the English word, ‘Evil’. I wrote the Shiva Trilogy to explain the concept of Evil. But had I written in Sanskrit, there would be no need for explanation because the concept of evil didn’t exist. Nothing is pure evil. Everything exists for a purpose. (Immortal India, 44)

Thus, he exhorts an individual not to obliterate evil but to recognize it and propagates the Indian ideal that one should always acquaint himself with evil from varied angles before attacking it. Since ideals are pivotal to resolve the imbroglio of tangled perceptions, they constitute basis for conceptualizing cultural identity in literature as Raymond Williams highlights:

Intellectual and imaginative works are analysed in relation to particular traditions and societies, but will also include analysis of elements in the way of life that to followers of other definitions are not ‘culture’ at all; the organization of production, the structure of the family, the structure of institutions which express or govern social relationships, the characteristic forms through which members of the society communicate. (41-42)

Cultures and their narratives are intimately allied with that of the foundational myths: the stories which locate the origin of the nation, the people, and their national character so early that they are lost in the mists of, not "real," but "mythic" time. Invented traditions make the confusions

and disasters of history intelligible. Myths of origin also help disenfranchised peoples to express their resentment and its contents in intelligible terms. They provide a narrative in terms of which an alternative history or counter-narrative, which pre-dates the ruptures of colonization, can be constructed.

Amish investigates existing archetypal myths along with socio-cultural context which gives an interpretation of Indian cultural identity. He distills his philosophy and logical narration into mythology and historical account to recognize the past and determine the present. Edward Brathwaite says, “The recognition of an ancestral relationship with a folk or aboriginal culture, whether African or American-Indian involves the artist in a journey into the past and hinter-land which is at the same time a movement of possession into present and future. (Qtd in *Empire Writes Back* 145). Amish is quite aware of the importance of millennia old stories and concepts which have been super relevant even for 21st century. His contemporary Devdutt Pattanaik too acknowledges the same in a Facebook Post:

Few understand the power of mythology. It expresses perceptions of a society, it always has. It always will. Those who do not understand or accept the reality of myths to the past, or to the primitive time people: as people change, their myths change and so do their stories, symbols and rituals. (Devdutt Pattanaik)

Since Myths in India have been closely associated with religious sentiments and concerns, they enable spiritual evolution. This spiritual evolution in turn leads to the ultimate goal of the human being- communion with God and hence becoming God. Thus, Tripathi presents mythology as the heart and soul of Indian cultural ethos in a modernized, justified and scientific way. He asserts that myths in India channelize the process of human life and their consequent identity. He exhibits that myths in India are far different from other countries as:

...religion and liberalism have not been historically at war in India. Consequently, different religions have learnt to coexist and by large, be open-minded; we celebrate modernization and localization, keeping our theology relevant, and hence alive” (Immortal India 21).

Along with myth and history, Tripathi investigates various current issues like LGBT rights and Section 377, religious violence and conversions, female foeticide, crime against women, bane on casteism and death of Rohit Vemula. He urges to end everything that defames our ancient culture. Being an IIM graduate, he measures the stress of modern man working in MNC's and explores his quandary for self-recognition. However, he recognizes the fact that Indian cultural values are very effective in this predicament. His religious upbringing enables him to exhibit Indian mores, myths and characters in an excellent way. Tripathi has had a strong inclination for Indian culture and traditions as he boldly declares:

I am extremely proud to be Indian. There is no other place in the world I'd rather live. There's no other place in the world where I would like to die. And even in my next life, I'd like to be born right here once again. (Introduction, Immortal India, xxv)

Thus, his passion for Indian culture is idiosyncratic as he firmly believes that Indian culture is eternal. It witnesses the fact that Indian culture has been maneuvered focusing at the mingling of wisdom and suppleness to regulate and adopt newness as well as maintaining its age-old identity. This obviously makes it strongly sustainable as it has survived despite numerous violent and intellectual assaults. Amish explores the view that Indian culture is established on the strong foundations of ancient concepts directly derived from the Vedas, the Ramayana; the Mahabharata and Shiva Purana. It is further refined by many outside interactions. Because of its accretive nature, it always assimilated new reforms and enriched itself.

Amish leaves no stone unturned to revitalize indigenous culture at home and wherever he goes. He displays a consistent resonance of Indian culture to usher his sentiments. Sudhir Kakar has very fittingly given voice to the fact:

Our biological-physical endowment indelibly embellished by the culture of the particular society which surrounds us from the beginning of life, enveloping us like the very air we breathe and without which we do not grow into viable human beings (Inner World 8-9).

Tripathi concedes this fact in the Acknowledgements of Immortal India:



India, my country, and the land of my karma. I am defined to a great degree by my Indian heritage. My thoughts, my values, my way of life, are moulded by the culture and the heritage of my land. (Immortal India xix)

A critical analysis of Amish's nonfictional work, *Immortal India* displays that his basic concern lies in highlighting the special features of Indian culture that distinguish India as a distinct country. The significance of this very ancient culture, from which lessons can be drawn for imminent generations. In context of all these interpretations, Tripathi not only wrestles with the current issues but sensitizes the modern generation about cultural ethics. He feels highly proud to be an Indian and always flaunts Indian culture. However, he also warns that proud should not blind us to our problems. His major concern in this literary work is to acquaint young readers with their responsibility towards their motherland especially in restoring her ancient cultural pride. He ponders over the issue if Indian youth were 'less Indian' in comparison to their parents since they are more insubordinate and audacious. By being so, Tripathi thinks that they are 'more Indian' than their ancestors. He is of the view that insurgence is the essence of creativity. However, he bluntly asserts that rebellion with violence or verbal abuse is undesirable as it leads to moral degradation and mayhem. Hence, they should always go ahead with a sense of purport because modern generation has a significant role to play in ensuring and propagating Indian culture.

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