

Book Review: “The Immortals of Meluha” by Amish Tripathi

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India, as we know, is very vast and as much (if not more) diverse nation but still with a lot of common beliefs which may be practiced with different flavors of various regions. The same is true for how we worship our gods as well. Where, for instance, Lord “Vishnu” – arguably the most worshipped and decorated God with various Avatars in Lord Rama, Lord Krishna and many more powerful figures - is the name that is more common across North India, He is also called as Lord Venkatesh, Swami Narayan, in South India and several other names in different other parts of India. In fact, even the rituals to offer prayers to Lord Vishnu also vary to some degrees from one part of the country to the other.

But, having had the privilege of spending significant amount of time in the two entirely different regions of our country, I have noticed that all across the country, Lord Shiva is usually called with only one name – Shiva – and we also do quite similar things as part of rituals and while offering prayers to him, be it here at a temple in Allahabad or one in Bangalore. The reason of mentioning all this is one – I believe, the most dreadful, and yet having the nick name Bhola or Bholenath, with common ways of worshipping (usually bathing ShivaLing with water or milk) across our such a diverse country is one and only Lord Shiva and therefore it is bound to create huge interest with certain amount (or at least the potential) of backlash when someone comes up with a book (in fact series of the books) humanizing the Lord Himself!

“The Immortals Of Meluha” is the first book of the trilogy that completes the whole story but I feel this is the most important one in many ways: 1. Before this book, no one knew about the author and hence no prejudice was set in readers’ mind; 2. This book really laid premises for the other two which were to follow, with not only having it’s own compelling story which was complete unto itself but also setting up a plot which left the readers craving for more instantly; 3. Although the story very well continues in the remaining two books with enough masala that one craves for, I think the core of the philosophy on which this series feeds on is very much and very well set in the first book itself that leaves a lasting impression. It is therefore natural for us to focus on this particular book here.

Many people in India (and I am one of them) grow up hearing a lot of legends about Shiva or Bhola as we call him fondly. How He is the care taker of our world, how He drank all the poison to save us, His marriage to Sati and Parvati, His two sons Ganesh and Kartik, how He lives in the Himalayas (Kailash Parvat to be precise), how He lives as a jogi with long, strangled hair with a penchant for chillum, His companions Bhadra, Nandi and then His third eye – symbol of utmost destruction! Shiva is raw power, that energy which can transform any form to any being and when you come to know that someone has written a book around Him, not sure unravelling or weaving more curiosity about Him, that is certain to draw interest.

The book starts with an intriguing thought – is Shiva just in our minds, a mythological figure which nevertheless inspires us day in day out or is Shiva an extraordinary human being who once did live on this earth and with his extraordinary deeds became immortal - the Lord Shiva that we all know. Touching down upon beliefs of people can be a scary idea and we can very well argue that is it really necessary to even think in this direction, that writer wants us to. Or do we really need someone to tell us what to think of our God, how to think about Him and whether it really matters what others think of us or our beliefs? Where this school of thought can be debated and with enough amount of passion and pride, I think I will keep myself aloof (at least as of now) from going in any such direction and would rather dwell into what exactly I found interesting or mention-worthy in this book.

A writer’s biggest challenge lies not in the thoughts that form the basis of his/her creation or even the words or sentences that he/she has to anyway find and form in abundance to complete the whole story that he/she intends to write, but, to me, the biggest challenge that a writer has, is being consistent with the philosophy and spirit that not only strikes a reader’s mind but also reflects the purity and integrity of thoughts which never cease to stop all through the book, thus keeping the audience on the hook all the way through to the end. I think that is where “The Immortals Of Meluha” stand out as a master piece.

Amish Tripathi (the writer), as an open secret, has not only woven his magic around the legends of Lord Shiva but also the great land of India, capturing the true renaissance of this great nation and tells his story so beautifully that it almost makes the non-imaginers quite the thinkers.

The story is about a Tibetan man, who lives on the Kailash mountain (which, geographically is situated in the Tibet region and hence outside the boundary of India) and is the leader of a warrior tribe called Gunas. This man has a friend called Bhadra (a warrior himself) and loves to puff marijuana through a chillum with his friend. Sounds familiar? No surprises, the name of this fierce fighter is – Shiva!

The premises in which the story is set is really interesting and intriguing. Shiva's destiny lands him from the rough life of Kailash to an ideal world of Meluha. Again, the writer does a fantastic job of creating a world which is akin to the term that almost everyone has at least heard of if not used in day to day vocabulary – "Ram Rajya". Ram Rajya is considered to be an ideal world set by Lord Ram where no wrong can and no wrong does take place. Meluha is the name that symbolizes Ram Rajya and this really makes the plot really interesting.

They say, a hero is not born one but when a man (or woman for that matter) rises to the occasion showing exceptional qualities in exceptional circumstances, that a hero is born. Rising to the occasion is what makes a normal human being special - a hero, a god - and once that person realizes it all, the self-confidence takes such a boost that the person is changed forever and mostly for good!

Without even knowing what he can and what he is up to, Shiva's destiny takes him through such an unbelievable journey, going through which he realizes his true potential and emerges out as a true leader, a savior, and more importantly a Hero, a god who commands the respect and faith of a whole community of Meluhans for who the legend of Nilkantha has come true in the form of Shiva who would get them rid of all the dark, evil forces.

As a reader, you are really glued until the point where Shiva, knowing that he is at the side of good, in a war against evil, rises as a god and destroys the evil side, well almost! A fantastic narration and build up and to the followers of Shiva, a well narrated story.

But here lies the real beauty of this book. When we almost are certain, like Shiva is in the story, that evil is defeated and good has prevailed, he realizes, and to his utter shock and disbelief (just like the reader is forced to do) that what he thought (or was made to think) was evil was actually not but just another way of life, another perspective to life and another civilization that although on the outset seems like all rotten and corrupt, is actually more colorful and vibrant than the one that seems to be the ideal but has its own flaws in being one. And this is perhaps the core of the nature, the universe and this book (in fact the Trilogy itself). When even God can get confused over what is wrong and what is right, who is sane and who is evil then think how it is even more difficult to we human beings, the mortals.

Nature (read life) is like a coin that always has (or is supposed to have) two distinctively opposite sides. Of course, we always choose to pick one or favour one and that more or less becomes our right (correct) side and naturally the other side then has to be considered as the wrong one since it is at the opposite of the right one, that right which is right because it is our chosen one.

The journey of Shiva is all about finding the correct right and distinguishing between the other side versus the real bad. And when we go through this book with this mindset - which actually and commendably is automatically made going through the story – without being judgmental, we realize what a masterpiece it is which at every moment, every page, every chapter is throwing us a constant beam of wisdom and philosophy which can potentially be used as a guiding principle in once life to lead a healthy and happy life.

Shiva, not only realizes that the other side of civilization was not evil but just different, he also realizes that with the perfect system that Meluha had, had its own major flaws and eventually fights against those flaws as well. The fact that he could marry Sati, a widow Meluhan, who by the rules

could not have been given another chance makes it all even more appealing given that our society is still struggling with lots of stigmas and ridiculous practices that we need to fight one and all.

The story has a lot of twists and turns, a lot of relatable incidents that shake you very well from inside, enough mythological legends (e.g. river Saraswati) and a story which at one end do make you believe Shiva was a God, at the other end humanizes Him so wonderfully that rather than having questions or doubts you just start believing that perhaps this might all have been true and indeed Lord Shiva did take such an Avatar.

I am not going to summarize the story of the book here as that would not be fair to the writer, but I am sure, with all that I am able to ink here, it would still raise enough points that define this book and it all would definitely make more sense when one does go through the book and like so many out there who have had the privilege of going through the Trilogy or even the first book that we are actually talking about here, I am sure this remains as one of the best mythological books that I have ever read and would strongly recommend whoever has not done it already. May Lord Shiva bless you!

Note: Tripathi, Amish. The immortals of Meluha. Wastland Press. 2010.