

## FICTIONALISING FACTS OR FACTUALISING FICTION: EVALUATING THE VALIDITY OF DEVDUTT PATTANAİK'S MANAGEMENT LESSONS DRAWN FROM MYTHOLOGY

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### *Abstract*

*In India there has been a debate about whether the two primary epics of Hindu mythology – Ramayana and Mahabharata – are facts or fiction. In parallel, a body of nonfiction seeking inspiration from mythology has emerged from India and a new trend of drawing management lessons from Indian myths has become very popular. An author, who has resorted to this practice in his writing is Devdutt Pattanaik who has produced works in this genre for the past 20 years. By analysing Pattanaik's five management related books and varied articles, this paper examines the feasibility of applying mythology to deriving management lessons, thus determining whether this has added value to the texts and the genre, or rather resulted in their devaluation.*

**Keywords:** mythology, nonfiction, management, frameworks.

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### *1. Introduction*

*Myths are, in fact...neither primitive nor untrue. They are, rather, a kind of poetry that helps us make sense of the world and our place in it.*

- Stephen H. Furrer

Mythology holds a significant place within a culture. It colours stories we hear/read as children and makes its way into our life as adults, when we develop the faculty of appreciating art, where many a mythological tale is imagined and portrayed by artists, writers and poets. Mythology impacts language through phrases like 'Pandora's box' or 'Herculean effort' that get coined not just through literature and poetry, but also through various metaphors, associated with characters from mythology. For example, in Indian culture, someone who is popular among women and surrounded by them all the time is often called 'Krishna', the central character in the epic *Mahabharata* and a major Hindu deity. Since mythology is such an inherent part of our everyday existence, the interest in studying it, to explore, evaluate and learn from it, is therefore not surprising.

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In fact, as Richard Cavendish points out in *Mythology*:

*Interest in mythology has grown steadily throughout the last hundred years, powered by the realization that myths are not childish stories or mere pre-scientific explanations of the world, but serious insights into reality... They are part of the fabric of human life, expressing beliefs, moulding behaviour and justifying institutions, customs and values. It is consequently impossible to understand human beings without an understanding of their myths (Cavendish, 2003: 8).*

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## ***2. Contextualising and Defining the Scope of this Research***

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It is probably for this very exploration of the self and contemporary realities through the mythological characters of the past that many Indian writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-), Mahasweta Devi (1926-2016) and, more recently, Amish Tripathi (1974-), Anand Neelakantan (1973-) and Ashwin Sanghi (1969-) have used Indian mythology in their works of fiction to tell and retell stories. However, apart from fiction, drama and poetry, what is interesting to note is how, over the years, there has emerged an Indian body of nonfiction which has sought inspiration from mythology. For example, Devdutt Pattanaik (1970-) is an author who has taken this approach towards mythology, and who has, through the vast body of nonfiction he has written over the last 20 years, gained acclaim as a 'mythologist', as he calls himself on his website. Pattanaik was trained in medicine and worked in pharmaceutical industries and the healthcare sector for 15 years, post which he has focused on his passion – writing about mythology. He has 30 books to his credit and has authored 600 articles in columns and is a popular speaker on mythology, in national and international forums.

His work provides insights into varied branches of Indian mythology – Jain, Buddhist, Hindu – as well as Abrahamic, Egyptian and Greek mythology, the latter of which he clubs under world mythology. Given the limited scope of this intervention, my paper will dwell upon Pattanaik's five management related books such as *Business Sutra* (2013), *The Success Sutra* (2015), *The Leadership Sutra* (2016), *The Talent Sutra* (2016) and *Leader* (2017) and articles which have appeared in newspapers over the past two decades. The attempt would be to critique the applicability of Hindu mythology, as used by Pattanaik to determine whether drawing management lessons from it has added value to the texts and the genre, or rather resulted in their devaluation.

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### ***3. Rationale Behind using Mythology for Deriving Management Lessons***

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Before one delves into analysing Devdutt Pattanaik's work, it is important to touch upon, the rationale that Pattanaik gives for seeking management lessons from mythology. Pattanaik states, in his first comprehensive book, *Business Sutra*<sup>2</sup> that:

*the point is not so much to explain mythology as it is to derive frameworks from it...When we take decisions, we use frameworks, either consciously or unconsciously. This book is full of frameworks ...While frameworks of management science seek to be objective, the frameworks of Business Sutra are primarily subjective. The book does not seek to sell these frameworks, or justify them as the truth (Pattanaik, 2013: 20).*

He further clarifies that the frameworks that he weaves through the series of his management related books are “reflective, not prescriptive” (Pattanaik, 2013: 21) and their “aim is not to derive knowledge from the past ,... but discover the invisible levers that play a key role in business success or failure” (Pattanaik, 2013: 21).

By contextualising his views, Pattanaik begins to unravel different layers of frameworks, taking the reader through a journey into the world of Hindu mythology. Well-known episodes from mythology, primarily from the two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and famous tales surrounding figures from mythology – Shiva, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Krishna, to name a few – are handpicked and analysed to derive management lessons. Such tales are extremely popular for most people, who have heard them since childhood and seen on television in programmes based on these epics. However, although some may have applied the lessons from such tales to their daily life, there were few attempts to connect these stories or to draw parallels with the jargon of a discipline like management – which is why Pattanaik's insights are different from the commonplace.

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### ***4. Devdutt Pattanaik's Technique of Drawing Parallels***

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At the outset of *Business Sutra*, one finds a comparison drawn between the hierarchy of the Hindu gods and that of authorities in an organisation:

*At the lowermost level are the humans. Above them are the devas or gods, led by Indra. Above Indra is Brahma and above him is Vishnu. Shiva is above Vishnu and the goddess is above Shiva...Organizations, too, have a similar hierarchy in place. At the top sits the CEO, below him sit many unit heads under whom are many managers who have many executives under them (Pattanaik, 2013: 204).*

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<sup>2</sup> Sutra, as Pattanaik himself explains, means a string that connects the dots or an aphorism.

In Hindu mythology, although each god is looked up to for different reasons and qualities that she/he symbolises, capturing them in one frame, especially in the form of an 'escalation matrix', has not been attempted in nonfiction, that is why Pattanaik's work is quite unique.

Similarly, another interesting insight within the organisation is drawn through a parallel within the universe of the organisation and the literal and external universe that surrounds us. Moreover, since a vast section of the Indian populace places a lot of importance on astronomy and astrology, this parallel resonates very well, especially with an Indian audience. In his book, *The Success Sutra*, Pattanaik compares the literal universe around us with the metaphorical universe, which is an inherent part of the organisation:

*Taras (stars) and grahas (celestial bodies/planets) are people who make up the organization. The taras are the nameless workers while the grahas are the talent who determine the fate of the organization. No one knows the names of individual taras; they are identified through the constellation they belong to... Likewise in an organization, less value is given to individual workers and more to the group they belong to (Pattanaik, 2015: 101).*

Such contrasts quickly strike a chord with the reader, as they are general and not complicated to understand. Moreover, they are explained in an accessible manner to both an Indian and non- Indian audience.

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### ***5. Unravelling Pattanaik's Striking Parallels from Hindu Mythology***

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The appealing element about the parallels Pattanaik draws is that they go beyond merely presenting insights to rethinking about them or to seeking what they symbolise. For example, when the author speaks about leadership empathy in *The Talent Sutra*, a lesser known episode from the *Mahabharata* is quoted, where Krishna, the charioteer of the warrior Arjuna, requests him to release some water by shooting the ground, so that Krishna can bathe the tired horses on the battlefield, during the war of Kurukshetra. Through this incident, the author aims at commenting on leadership empathy, when he opines that:

*Often we forget the 'horses' that help navigate through our daily lives. Horses are a crude metaphor for those who make our lives comfortable but who do not have much of a voice when it comes to their own comfort. In every office, especially in India, there are a host of people who keep the office running ... A simple study of how organizations treat this silent staff is an indicator of leadership empathy (Pattanaik, 2016: 70-71).*

One striking parallel from the Sutra series includes the author calling Krishna an innovator, as he possesses the unique distinction of breaking and bending old rules

and making way for better ones. The character of Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas from the *Mahabharata*, is a much celebrated character who has been explored in fiction to give an account of the epic from a woman's point of view. In his nonfiction book, Pattanaik adds a very interesting dimension to Draupadi's character. Draupadi becomes symbolic of the talented individual in an organisation, who, either obviously or subtly, becomes a shared resource for many bosses in the organisation. Like Draupadi had to balance out equations with her five husbands, the individual has to satisfy everyone intellectually and ensure that a harmony exists within the organisation. Pattanaik not only looks at popular characters from mythology, but also sheds light on characteristics of their personality – an aspect which has never been explored and which becomes his Unique Selling Proposition (USP) in management jargon.

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### ***6. Analysing the Uniqueness of Pattanaik's Style***

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Pattanaik's uniqueness does not remain limited to the parallels he draws, but further extends to their applicability to the real life scenario, as he suggests at the end of every short chapter. Like in management science, a lot of significance is placed on the case study method. Similarly, in Pattanaik's Sutras each principle is explained with the help of a caselet in a highlighted box, which acts "as an aid towards reinforcement and better understanding of the sutra" (Devarajan, 2013).

Apart from showing the application of the sutras, Pattanaik's writing moves from depiction to retelling and finally questioning truths – which gives it an almost philosophical streak. For instance, when he speaks about Narada, a trouble-making sage in Swargalok (heaven), he alludes to those individuals in an office, who make people feel insecure:

*Narada continues to be on the prowl...Step into any organization anywhere in the world, and if you find 'office politics' know that Narada has been at work...as we bicker and bitch Narada watches from the shadows, waiting when the world will be exhausted of these petty emotions and focus on something more meaningful (Pattanaik, 2017: 137-9).*

In a similar vein, when Pattanaik describes the modern workplace and the almost maniacal obsession of corporations to stay ahead of their competitors, he compels the reader to pause and introspect, peppering his writing with brief moments of brilliance: "where from comes our ambition and where is it taking us? Maybe the answer will create a workplace that is less paranoid, less aggressive and more at peace with itself" (Pattanaik, 2017: 29).

Moreover, in order to make these allusions and frameworks both alluring and comprehensible to the reader, like management frameworks, his narrative is accompanied by numerous illustrations, sketched by Pattanaik himself. These caricatures, drawings and contextual diagrams help "illuminate the meaning and

message of the Sutra in crystal clear fashion”, as R. Devarajan puts it in an article from *The Hindu* (2013).

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### **7. Limitations of Pattanaik's Writing**

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As the structure and style of the sutras become repetitive, their newness fades away and monotony sets in. Although there is an appendix at the end of each of the five books referring to the non-English concepts and words from both conventional and business perspective, a certain degree of mythological and management knowledge is required for the reader to appreciate and comprehend the text. The subtleties of the books could get quite challenging, not only for a non-Indian audience, but also for an Indian reader, who may not be very well acquainted with mythology or management concepts.

Moreover, *Business Sutra*, which was the first among the Sutra series of books, is very comprehensive and presents varied aspects of business. The other books in the Sutra series, such as *The Success Sutra*, *The Leadership Sutra*, *The Talent Sutra and Leader* are more concise and borrow heavily from *Business Sutra*. Hence, reading through a Sutra series, one often feels a déjà vu, as frameworks and caselets get repeated and one can, more or less, anticipate where the narrative is going.

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### **8. Exploring Frameworks beyond Hindu Mythology**

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Besides the Sutra Series, Pattanaik's articles which have appeared in newspapers over the last 20 years are inspired from mythology as well as folklore, used to draw upon various real life equivalent situations and dilemmas. For example, the Vikram and Vetala tales from the *Kathasaritsagar*<sup>3</sup> were not mere children's tales, but were meant to lay bare challenges for future leaders. The tales unfold as a story told by the ghost Vetala to the great king Vikramaditya, who has been requested by a sorcerer to fetch Vetala from a crematorium. The condition that Vetala lays down on Vikram is that he should not speak throughout their journey from the crematorium to the sorcerer's place, and, if he does, Vetala will fly back to the crematorium, where Vikram will have to go back and fetch him again. However, Vetala poses a question to Vikram at the end of every story and seeks an answer to this question. Pattanaik perceives the structure of the story as a case study that students are given in Business Schools and regards Vikram as a leader or CEO of an organisation, who solves a tricky situation in a company. Apart from Vikram and Vetala, who are among the most popular folktale characters, Pattanaik also uses the wisdom from the *Bible*, Greek mythology and Islamic tenets to present useful tips on leadership in his most recent work, *Leader: Fifty Insights from Mythology*.

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<sup>3</sup> *Kathasaritsagar* is a collection of Indian legends, mythology, fairytales and folktales, written in the 11th century.

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### 9. Analysing the Validity of Pattanaik's Approach

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In his writing, Pattanaik has achieved to inform and inspire in one's day to day decisions and dilemmas through the powerful associations he draws. Looking at his nonfiction, be it the books or management articles, one can observe that the parallels and frameworks he depicts are not far-fetched. The comparisons are convincing, as each contrast is explained in detail for the reader to ruminate over its significance. Through the application of Hindu pantheon to an everyday context, the mythological characters and situations become accessible and legendary characters like Rama, Hanuman, Draupadi, Saraswati, Krishna, Shiva have come to be known to a larger audience.

One can surely say that his writing may not stir the readership to the point of catharsis, but his art is definitely mimetic, as the reader can visualise oneself as a part of a mentioned situation in an organisation. The caselets at the end of every chapter are believable, easy to recognise and more akin to the Indian workplace, where hierarchical structures have existed for a long time, unlike the other international organisations which are moving towards flatter structures, with less hierarchical levels. Moreover, in all his Sutra series Pattanaik reiterates that his books capture an Indian approach to Management. However, on a general level, non Indian audiences can also identify with the situations presented, as, in a sense, the challenges are universal and Pattanaik tries to present them on a daily basis. Leadership crises, retaining and nurturing talent, approach to office politics, decision making, facing adversities with courage and falling prey to stagnation are just a few examples of the issues which form the body of Pattanaik's writing.

Whether Pattanaik's work would inspire the use of frameworks drawn from Hindu mythology in Indian or Western Business Schools remains a matter of debate, as most of the models, followed in Business Schools currently borrow heavily from Western theories and thought and the jargon is also Western. Insights from Hindu mythology are offered quite often by way of talks to students, which make them realise that new areas are to be discovered. In addition, his writing also opens doors to the unexplored area of nonfiction, even if mythology and reality are perceived as opposites. It is in that respect that the exploration of mythology adds value to the genre of nonfiction and helps the reader draw useful management lessons.

What is also commendable is that the full-fledged frameworks developed by Pattanaik in his first book, *Business Sutra*, and later, through the Sutra series, have also been developed in articles, lectures at different forums, a TED Talk, television series on mythology and its relevance, as well as in the business world. In fact, Pattanaik specifically says in his first book that the frameworks are "shaped by my prejudices and limited by my experiences; to work they have to become yours, shaped by your prejudices, limited by your experiences" (Pattanaik, 2013: 22).

However, Pattanaik is fully aware of the limitations of his approach and is able to predict the types of responses he is likely to receive for venturing on the road not yet taken. He ends his first book in the Sutra Series, *Business Sutra*, with a one page bearing the title, 'How to Reject this Book', where he pours out all the possible reactions that he is likely to receive from people who might label his work as right wing propaganda, dismiss his approach as confused and complex, call his ideas exotic, as most things perceived in the East, or assume that his ideas will work only in theory, not in practice. By including this section at the end of his book, Pattanaik steps out of the body of his work and gets into the skin of his audience who can actually visualise him casting a doubting glance at his own work.

In this endearing objectivity, yet subjectivity of Pattanaik's insights, the reader is compelled to dig through more layers of mythology, to attempt at unearthing something novel and valuable for himself/herself and to reflect upon it, to deal with modern day personal and professional dilemmas. One could only hope that leaders from mythology like Arjuna or Rama would come to one's rescue while negotiating a tricky and cryptic problem at the workplace.

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### **10. Conclusions**

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Pattanaik's writing also reminds the reader that there is so much inspiration to be sought from mythological characters and tales and advises his audience not to be a Gandhari from the *Mahabharata*, who blindfolded herself to be at par with her blind husband, Dhrithrashtra. Pattanaik's words at the beginning of the *Business Sutra* remain with us, inspiring us to dig deeper and discover more than what meets the eye. The words with which he begins *Business Sutra* loom large, as if welcoming the reader to his world, persuading him to open his/her eyes and mind to newer worlds and possibilities:

*Within infinite myths lies an eternal truth  
Who sees it all?  
Varuna has but a thousand eyes  
Indra a hundred  
You and I, only two* (Pattanaik, 2013: 23)

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