

Mythology as an Inner Compass

In Conversation with Amish Tripathi
By Vasant Sanzgiri



Amish Tripathi is the prolific author of the hugely successful Shiva Trilogy, the Ramachandra series and a nonfiction book *Immortal India*. His work has been recognized by numerous literary awards, and publishing benchmarks; the Shiva Trilogy is the highest selling book series in Indian publishing history. Amish, who goes by his first name only, seeks to be judged by his own karma, rather than that of his antecedents.

His books are steeped in familiar mythology, replete with symbolism, but with an emphasis on philosophy and a message that is surprisingly modern and liberal in its attitude towards gender, equality, and socio-politics.

Amish believes that "while truth is one, wise men speak of it as many" and that ancient traditions supported the ability to respect multiple, and even opposing, points of view, originating from different religions, cultures, and communities. His writing evokes an Ancient India that was adaptable, inclusive, and open-minded; a heritage that valued the application of profound wisdom in almost every area of human endeavor.

With his effort to revive this spirit in a captivating and universally accessible template, Amish has revived the eagerness and curiosity to investigate our glorious roots more fully. He made the time to visit New Acropolis (Mumbai) for a *Friends of New Acropolis* event at which he was interviewed by Vasant Sanzgiri. Amish shared his own worldview, and offered insights into the imaginative world of his literature. Below are excerpts from the conversation.

VASANT SANZGIRI: In your entire body of writing you have chosen to re-imagine mythology and used mythological characters and myths as a framework for your stories. Can you tell us why?

AMISH: Mythology comes from the Greek root word *Mythos*, which is a story that hides a philosophical truth. The story itself is not so important; the purpose

is to discover the philosophy that lies underneath it. Why can't we just communicate the truth the way it is? Because there is no one truth which is good for everyone. You have to discover your own truth. The beauty of it is that the same story allows people to discover different philosophical truths. If you read the traditional version of the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, different people draw different interpretations from it because they come with their own life experiences, and they need to learn a particular philosophy which will help them at that point of time. The best carrier for conveying these philosophies is a story because it makes it fun.

Let me give you an example of this. Ved Vyas compiled the *Vedas*. But Ved Vyas was really a title. It is believed that in every age of confusion, when the knowledge of the *Vedas* is lost, someone appears to revive it. And the one who does that for his or her age is called Ved Vyas. Krishna Dwaypayan was the Ved Vyas of our age. He knew this knowledge was extremely important, but he also knew that it would be really difficult and boring for most people to grasp. So the legend goes that he actually composed the *Mahabharata* so that he could convey the philosophy of the *Vedas* in a page-turning, fun story, accessible to everyone. Pure philosophy, like pure upanishadic philosophy or the platonic dialogues, very few people enjoy. But everyone enjoys a story. To me, that was a role model worth following.



All my books have some core philosophy. And I build the story as a wrapper to unravel and encourage discussions around the core principles. The philosophy at the heart of the Shiva Trilogy is: *What is Evil?* The answer is obviously not simple. The philosophy at the heart of the Ramachandra series is: *What is an Ideal Society?* Again the answer is not simple. It depends on what society wants at that point in time. These are things that we, as a society, in the last hundred years have not debated. Ideally, we may want a law abiding society. But sometimes laws and freedom are in contradiction with each other. So what is the ideal balance? India certainly doesn't have a problem of excessive compliance. Societies like in Japan, for example, could learn about rebellion. All these are issues that require debate; between violence and nonviolence, between traditions and finding new approaches, and to find the right balance between all of these.

The entire point of literature is to hold up this mirror, and to have these conversations, because that's how society will move forward. Everyone has their role to play. The job of a businessman is to create wealth, so that it can be used for the good of society. The job of leaders is to govern, so that there is order. The job of storytellers and philosophers is to trigger public conversation so that society can move in certain directions. If a story has certain resonance at a point of time, it means that the society has found what it needs to move forward. An ideal society is not a destination,

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VASANT: In your Ramachandra series Lord Rama represents an archetype. What is the importance of archetypes and what relevance could they have for us today?

AMISH: One of the reasons I think the pagan approach had the concept of multiple gods and goddesses was that there are different messages that are needed for different people and different eras. Lord Ram is called *maryada purshottam*, often erroneously translated as 'the perfect man', which is actually an incomplete translation. *Purush ottam* means the perfect man. *Maryada* is honour, law, the right way to live. So *maryada purshottam* means 'the ideal follower of laws'. What the archetypes teach us through the lives of all our gods and goddesses, is the strengths and challenges of each archetypal approach. So if Lord Rama personifies the approach of the ideal follower of laws, then what are the challenges of this approach? Obviously it is very good for society; it makes for a society that is very fair, just and well run. But there are obviously huge challenges in personal life. This is what we must learn from, and apply into our own lives.

VASANT: Your stories are full of symbolism. You have used symbols on the covers of your book, and there are symbols that head each chapter. What is the philosophical significance of these symbols?

AMISH: Symbols are essential. They are a way to communicate something very complex with conciseness. But you have to know the background behind it. For example, what does this mean [folding hands in *Namaste* gesture]?

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This is *Namah-Te* and it enjoins and becomes *Namaste*, which means 'the divine in me recognizes the divine in you'. It's a verbal symbol that teaches you humility, because you are respecting the divine in someone else. And traditionally you didn't just do *namaste* to just other human beings; but also to animals, to the river, to everything. Because you recognise the divine in everything. This instinctively instills humility within you.

For the person receiving the symbol *namaste*, it's also a challenge to discover the divine within you. Just because you have it in you, doesn't mean that you have actually discovered it, or that you are living it. You may have been blessed with that potential, but you still have to work to actualise it. So, this one word or gesture carries so many layers of meaning. This is the power of symbols. The point, however, is that these symbols can only be understood in a particular cultural context. Regretfully, today we are losing the power of symbols because we are losing traditions, and failing to retain cultural contexts. Someone who doesn't know the beauty behind the word *namaste* will just see it as another way of saying 'hello', which is not what it is at all.

VASANT: As a lover of knowledge, and an author of an oeuvre that you hope your readers can learn from, could you throw some light on the traditional Indian systems of learning compared to the modern Western educational system?



AMISH: There were essentially three broad systems: the *gurukuls*, the *pathshalas*, and the *madrasas*. There was one of these in practically every village, and the teacher-student ratio was usually no more than 1:5. What is very interesting is that there was actually a very high male to female ratio. There were long hours and no vacations. And think of the texts that they taught! For example, the foundational mathematics text that was used across India for nearly a thousand years before the British destroyed our education system was called *Lilavati*. Here is an insight of the way a good education system balances your left and right brain.

Lilavati is actually a mathematical text composed by Rishi Bhaskar Acharya. He wanted to teach mathematics to his daughter, whose name was Lilavati. But like most youngsters, she thought maths was the most boring subject in the world. To make it interesting for her, he wrote up the theorems in the forms of poems. So, here is a Sanskrit poem which you can actually enjoy as beautiful poetry, and at the end of it, without realizing it, you have actually learnt a theorem. Think of the beauty of this; you are developing a creative right brain, learning beautiful Sanskrit poetry in a playful use of words and numbers, as well as developing the left brain with logical constructs.

The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* used to be standard texts too. When Sita ma was kidnapped, Sugriv tells his messengers to search for her. In a very long section he describes in detail the routes north, south, east and west, naming towns, rivers, lakes, islands in the ocean, etc. This is but a geography lesson in the form of a story.

I'm not deriding the logical rational approach, which is needed and it is important. The problem with our modern educational system is an over-dependence on it. The downside is that the right brain approach, using intuition as a way of discovering knowledge, has been ignored. This was the way our education

system was, making learning enjoyable, balancing both the left and right brain and this is what we really need to revive.

VASANT: Today, unfortunately we have separation in almost every facet of our life and our society. Yet, as philosophers, our quest is to move towards unity. How can we accomplish that, given the challenges we face at every turn in our lives?

AMISH: What do you mean by unity? Does unity require that every flower has to convert into a rose? That would actually be terrible, because it would be violence to the sunflower, it would be violence to the lotus. Or is it that every flower has the right to exist and find its own beauty, while being aware that there is a connecting thread that strings them together? How you define unity is extremely important; we must discover that there is something common between us, but I don't have to lose my individuality. That distinction is extremely important. If the concept of unity leads to hatred in your heart for someone else then you're on the wrong path. If you can manage that distinction, then you can be a source of positivity in the world. Find the commonality, but celebrate the differences as well.

There is a line I have quoted many times of Lord Ram, which means 'any man, any woman, any transgender, any living being, any plant, any animal, you give up deceit, come to me and you are all my people.'

Such a wonderful, open, inclusive line. We can use this to fight for the equal treatment of everyone, regardless of the personal choices that they make, and not force your choice on anyone else. Hating someone today for what their forefathers may have done is ridiculous. This is not some government problem or media problem, this is a social problem so all of us have to do our bit. Each and every one of us has to make our own personal changes and try and impact people that we interact with personally.



Audience: In the *Ramachandra* series, there's an intimate moment between Sita and Rama and the theme of the conversation suddenly shifts to *Dharma*. Why do your books talk so much about civic and social responsibility? Is love not equally important?

AMISH: Modern storytelling, including the storytelling in Hindi movies, is inspired by Aristotle's *Poetics*. These storytelling styles were often driven by human emotions and human experiences. So love stories and different aspects of love have always been a big part of the Greek Tragedies and closer to home, in Hindi movies. But this is one form of storytelling.

The Indian style of storytelling always had different explorations of *Dharma* at its heart. Even love was explored through *Dharma*; whether it is *Dharmic love* or *A-Dharmic love*.

The entire point was to discuss things which you can apply in your own life. If you see *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* from the perspective of a love story, you will be disappointed. But if you see it from the perspective of essentially an exploration of *Dharma*, then much of the story starts making sense. The perspective of the storyteller is to force you to explore some philosophies that you can learn from, and apply in your own life.

Audience: Throughout your talk with us today you've constantly spoken of how we should use the archetypes and the myths to learn from and translate into our everyday lives. Can you give us one vivid example of how to take a metaphor and transform it into a practical action that can engender sustainable change?

AMISH: Many of you might be aware of the *Sagar Manthana* story. The *Devas* churn the ocean to bring out treasures that are good for society: *Amrit*, *Kamadhenu*, *Kalpavriksha*, *Mahalakshmi*, etc. The *Devas* and the *Asuras*, in partnership, churn the ocean with the mountain, with Lord Vishnu, in his *Kurma* form, forming the base.

This entire story is actually metaphorical. It actually describes the process of change. Any process of change needs a partnership from opposing forces. Although the *Devas* and the *Asuras* are completely on opposite sides and hate each other, they partner up to start the process of change. And in a process of change, various good things will emerge. But the first thing to emerge is *Halalala*, the poison. And that is a natural result of change; some poison will come up at the beginning, but someone needs to be the Lord Shiva to drink up that poison for the good of society.



Audience: You used to be an atheist earlier. Do you believe in God now?

AMISH: My personal belief is that Lord Shiva, Lord Rama, Lady Sita, Lord Krishna, Lady Sati were all our ancestors. I believe that the difference between them and us is that they discovered the divine within themselves, while we are yet to discover the divine within ourselves. I believe that their blood flows in all our veins, and I find this belief very inspiring because then, we have to be worthy of our bloodline, our lineage and our sacred heritage. ★★★

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