Parables for Neoliberalism: Devdutt Pattanaik and the *Mahabharata* in Post-Liberalisation Indian English Literature

Chinmay Sharma

Published online: 10 Dec 2024.

Submit your article to this journal ⤤

View related articles ⤤

View Crossmark data ⤤

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ARTICLE

Check for updates

Parables for Neoliberalism: Devdutt Pattanaik and the *Mahabharata* in Post-Liberalisation Indian English Literature

Chinmay Sharma ⓘD

Department of English, Shiv Nadar University, Greater Noida, UP, India

ABSTRACT

This essay looks at the popular self-described mythologist, Devdutt Pattanaik, and his *Mahabharata* retelling, *Jaya* (2010), to analyse the production and dissemination of Hindu mythology in contemporary India as a guidebook. Drawing on cultural histories of book production in post-Independence India, the rise of the Hindu Right, and studies of neoliberalism and the post-millennial workspace, this essay argues that Pattanaik recontextualises the *Mahabharata* narrative using both rationalistic and pseudo-rationalistic knowledge systems to foreground the multiplicity of the *Mahabharata* narrative tradition while simultaneously reinscribing centre-margin hierarchies upon that multiplicity and legitimising the logic of Hindu history in his vision of a national Indian culture. Pattanaik thus retells the *Mahabharata* to provide lessons in self-control and self-regulation by reframing the narrative and rearticulating its moral lessons within the discourse of responsibilised productivity to (re)produce neoliberal workers.

Introduction

'Do you know what you should do with your research?' a relative once said, cornering me at a party. 'You should think about preparing an hour-long slideshow, and guest lecture at different institutes in India to teach them how to avoid the mistakes that led to the Kurukshetra war.'[1] This was a common refrain that emerged when I spoke to Indians about *Mahabharata* retellings, especially amongst those working in the corporate sector. They seemed certain that a narrative famous for its moral dilemmas, violence and tragedy could be instrumentalised to provide moral lessons for a specifically post-millennial, neoliberal Indian audience at the crossroads of economic and cultural globalisation, because it contained truths that were at once eternal and relevant to the contemporary neoliberal context, while also signifying a markedly Indian cultural heritage.

CONTACT Chinmay Sharma ✉ chinmay.sharma@snu.edu.in

1. The Kurukshetra war is the cataclysmic 18-day war fought between the Kuru princes, the sons of two brothers—Dhritarashtra and Pandu. It is the central plot event of the main narrative in the *Mahabharata*.

Myths are a prominent mode of religious thought, while adaptations often trade on the authority and prestige of canonical texts, not only providing an avenue for creative expression but also pedagogical models for a new audience.[2] *Mahabharata* retellings sit at the crossroads of these two modalities, myths and adaptations, providing avenues for creative expression as well as building pedagogical models for their audiences. Composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE, the *Mahabharata*, Ramanujan argues, is more of a narrative tradition than a singular text or narrative.[3] It has multiple Sanskrit recensions—now collated into a modern Critical Edition—and retellings across South and South-East Asia in different languages as well as screen, performance, visual and print cultures. As scholars have pointed out, with each retelling, meaning and relevance is (re)created at specific conjunctures, by their specific producers, for a specific audience.[4] Mythological retellings, and their relevance—explicit or implicit—are subject to historical and cultural processes of production and circulation. Neoliberalism, economic liberalisation, the concomitant individualisation of labour, along with the rapid expansion of the Indian English publishing industry from the 1990s, has led to the rise of a new type of mythological retelling that coincides with the rise of the Hindu Right in India, the mythological guidebook.[5]

The mythological guidebook is not the only cultural form that emerges from material and ideological shifts occasioned by neoliberalism and globalisation—the TV *Mahabharata*(s) and the *Mahabharata*s in Indian English genre fiction, for instance, have also been affected by and are imbricated in these shifts. Philip Lutgendorf, Angelika Malinar, Purnima Mankekar and Arvind Rajagopal explore the rise of the TV mythologicals within the context of neo-liberalisation and the rise of the Hindu Right.[6] Scholars have also explored the confluence of myths with

2. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (Routledge, 2006): 20.

3. A.K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (Oxford University Press, 1999): 162.

4. Philip Lutgendorf, 'Ramayan: The Video', *The Drama Review* 34, no. 2 (1990): 127–76; Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of the Divine Monkey* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Pamela Lothspeich, *Epic Nation: Reimagining the* Mahabharata *in the Age of the Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2009); Francesca Orsini, 'Texts and Tellings: Kathas in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries', in *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, ed. Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield (Open Book Publishers, 2015): 327–58; Chinmay Sharma, 'Many *Mahabharata*s: Linking Mythic Re-Tellings in Contemporary India' (unpublished PhD thesis, SOAS University of London, 2017), http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24908/1/Sharma_4389.pdf; Sucheta Kanjilal, 'Modern Mythologies: The Epic Imagination in Contemporary Indian Literature' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of South Florida, 2017), https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/6875/; Nell Shapiro Hawley and Sohini Sarah Pillai, ed., *Many Mahābhāratas* (State University of New York Press, 2021).

5. I take neoliberalism to mean 'an ensemble of economic policies in accord with its root principle of affirming free markets', and economic liberalisation the policies that allow for neoliberalism to emerge: Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Zone Books Near Future Series (Zone Books and MIT Press, 2015): 28. I take individualisation of labour to mean the effect of the change in labour management practice in neoliberalism which 'emphasise[s] individual achievement, self-motivation and competition', thus expecting workers to manage their own work and professional advancement, motivating them to perform because they identify with the company and its goals, enforcing discipline by the self and peers as well as through managers: Carol Upadhya, 'Introduction', in *In an Outpost of the Global Economy: Work and Workers in India's Information Technology Industry*, ed. Carol Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi (Routledge, 2008): 24.

6. Lutgendorf, 'Ramayan: The Video'; Angelika Malinar, 'The Bhagavadgītā in the Mahabharata TV Serial: Domestic Drama and Dharmic Solutions', in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (Sage, 1995): 442–67; Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in*

science fiction in Indian science and speculative fiction generally, as well as the rise of *Mahabharata* retellings in post-millennial Indian English genre fiction.[7] However, the mythological guidebook, its material and ideological contexts and effects have hitherto mostly escaped academic analysis.

'We don't read novels anymore, we read manuals', Devdutt Pattanaik asserts in an interview.[8] Pattanaik of course is not the first or the only author to adapt mythological literature to provide moral tales, but he has become one of the most popular in India as his work draws on multiple retellings in multiple languages and media. In this essay I argue that Pattanaik's stylistic innovation (and the cause for his popularity) lies in retelling myths as guidebooks, dispensing educational trivia as well as morals that promote a neoliberal ideology of labour. An accessible style of writing, delivered with informational asides neatly organised in end-boxes and bullet points, an insistence on drawing moral lessons for the neoliberal worker and prolific cultural production—he writes regular newspaper columns, consults on and hosts television shows and podcasts, and has recorded the flagship Audible India programme, *Suno Mahabharat Devdutt Pattanaik ke Saath* (*Listen to the* Mahabharata *with Devdutt Pattanaik*)—has made Pattanaik an immensely popular author and social media personality. Situating him within the cultural context of neo-liberalisation, Indian publishing and the rise of the Hindu Right, I focus on his retelling of the *Mahabharata*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010). *Jaya* is one of his first and most popular retellings. The essay unpacks the aesthetic strategies of the mythological guidebook as it draws from older mythological retellings, South Asian studies, and Hindu myths and pseudo-histories to create a network of information that recontextualises mythic narratives within the framework of the Indian nation and reinterprets them to deliver new moral lessons, recalibrating dharma and dharmic dilemmas in the *Mahabharata* as lessons for self-management and self-control. I argue that Pattanaik's mythological guidebooks in general, and his retelling of the *Mahabharata* in particular, are both a product of and (re)produce multi-sited, multilayered and contradictory forces working within this particular historical conjuncture of neoliberalism and the rise of the Hindu Right.

Economic liberalisation: Indian English publishing and the rise of the Hindu Right

Until 2010, the large majority of *Mahabharata* retellings in English circulated as translations (complete and/or abridged) and simple prose retellings, produced by a varying cast of writers and publishers, even though *Mahabharata* retellings in print

Postcolonial India (Duke University Press, 1999); Arvind Rajagopal, *Politics after Television: Religious Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Indian Public* (Cambridge University Press, 2004); Hawley and Pillai, ed., *Many Mahābhāratas*.

7. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, 'On the Mythologerm: Kalpavigyan and the Question of Imperial Science', *Science Fiction Studies* 43, no. 3 (2016): 435–58; Chinmay Sharma, 'The Expanding Worlds of Indian English Fiction', in *Indian Genre Fiction: Pasts and Future Histories*, ed. Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, Anwesha Maity and Aakriti Mandhwani (Routledge, 2018); Sami Ahmad Khan, *Star Warriors of the Modern Raj: Materiality, Mythology and Technology of Indian Science Fiction* (University of Wales Press, 2021).

8. Smriti Daniel, '"Listen, This Is What Your Ancestors Are Telling You"', *Sunday Times* website, July 10, 2011, accessed September 20, 2024, http://www.sundaytimes.lk/110710/Plus/plus_08.html.

were popular and critically acclaimed in other Indian languages—for instance, V.S. Khandekar's *Yayati* (1959) and Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* (1967) in Marathi; S.L. Bhyrappa's *Parva* (1967) in Kannada; Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1984) in Oriya; M.T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* (1984) in Malayalam; Ramdhari Singh Dinkar's *Rashmirathi* (1952), Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug* (1954) and Narendra Kohli's *Mahasamar* series (1988–2000) in Hindi, to name just a few.[9] Translations were usually written by academics and experts and published either by academic presses or multinational publishers. The close link with the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, the academic rigour of production and prestige associated with the publisher, along with the high-quality book packaging, high book price, and circulation almost exclusively in libraries and collections, ensured that the translations were considered highbrow cultural products. In contrast, simple retellings of Hindu epics in English have circulated at least since the late 1940s and early 1950s as lowbrow cultural products. Claiming to provide answers to their readers' problems, written in a simple English register for a general audience, and published by local Indian educational trusts and/or publishers, these books often escaped academic analysis even though some, like C. Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* (1951), were extremely popular.[10] Often written with an explicit or implicit pedagogical purpose, primarily for children, these books were packaged for the commercial book market—cheaply priced, with vivid, iconic covers. They appropriated the pedagogic style of oral storytelling modes as they taught their young audiences about Hindu mythology as Indian culture, imparting 'life-lessons', while seeking to create a pan-Indian audience.[11]

However, with economic liberalisation and cultural globalisation beginning in the 1980s, the cultural field and readership of modern Indian English publishing changed significantly. Liberalisation and globalisation resulted in the multilayered expansion of the field of Indian English book production. Multinational publishers entered the Indian market in the 1980s while literary Indian English fiction gained wider recognition in national and international literary circuits.[12] It also led to an increased commitment for publishing Indian authors in English, rather than simply importing English books from international markets.[13] The domestic commercial fiction market

---

9. For examples of abridged re-tellings in English, see C.V. Narasimhan, *The Mahabharata (An English Version Based on Selected Verses)* (Columbia University Press, 1961); Kamala Subramaniam, *Mahabharata* (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1965); P. Lal, *The Mahābhārata: Translated from the Sanskrit of Vyasa* (Writers Workshop, 1968); J.A.B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Beginning*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1975).

10. The Amar Chitra Katha series are an exception and have emerged as an object of research in the last ten years: see, for instance, Nandini Chandra, *The Classic Popular: Amar Chitra Katha (1967–2007)* (Yoda Press, 2008); Karline McLain, *India's Immortal Comic Books: Gods, Kings, and Other Heroes* (Indiana University Press, 2009).

11. C. Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 6th ed. (Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1968): 2–5; Chandra, *Classic Popular*, 28–62. Rajagopalachari writes, in the preface to the first edition, that he wrote his *Mahabharata* in order to '[give] to our Tamil children in easy prose the story of the *Mahabharata*'. Nandini Chandra similarly notes that one of the driving missions of *Amar Chitra Katha* was to familiarise Indian students with Indian history and Hindu mythology.

12. Tejeshwar Singh, 'English', in *60 Years of Book Publishing in India, 1947–2007*, ed. Dina N. Malhotra (The Federation of Indian Publishers, 2006): 51–58.

13. Peter Griffin, 'The Changing Face of Indian Publishing', Forbes India Blog, January 19, 2013, accessed October 7, 2024, http://forbesindia.com/blog/life/the-changing-face-of-indian-publishing/.

in Indian English publishing also began to grow in the early 2000s, leading to a rise in genre-fiction publishing.[14]

Initially, publishers tended to avoid including Hindu mythology in their fiction lists. It is hard to pinpoint any one cause for this sense of unease. One possibility could have been the rise of the Hindu Right. Accompanied by increased instances of communal rioting leading up to and from L.K. Advani's infamous Rath Yatra and the demolition of the Babri Masjid, adapting Hindu myths seems to have been suspect. Shashi Tharoor, for instance, whose novel, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), was one of the early fictional adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, recalls that 'during a literary reading in New Delhi in 1991 I was asked whether I was not worried about helping to revive the epic at a time when fanatics of various stripes were reasserting "Hindu pride" in aggressive and exclusionist terms'.[15] Ashok Banker, whose extremely popular *Ramayana* series (2003–6) was the first to adapt Hindu mythology into fantasy in Indian English, spoke in an interview about the difficulties he faced in getting accepted by publishers in the 1990s because publishers often mistook him 'for a right-wing fundamentalist type'.[16] This unease was not without good reason. While not every retelling or translation necessarily overlapped with Hindu Right ideology or activists, there were several significant institutional and ideological overlaps—though no direct links—between some retellings and the Hindu Right, such as Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* and the Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) series. Rajagopalachari's mythological retellings were published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan (BVB) headed by K.M. Munshi, which, while not officially a part of the Hindu Right parent body, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), shared overlapping ideological goals of a Hinduised Indian culture.[17] Similarly, Nandini Chandra argues that while ACK was different from Hindu Right propaganda, and its founder Anant Pai kept some distance from the RSS and its political affiliates, they too shared a common goal of evoking a sense of 'continuity and unity of national culture'.[18] There were also strong links between the BVB and ACK as the BVB provided ACK writers with space and resources to research stories in their library, as well as avenues for alternative employment.[19] With liberalisation, and the television adaptations of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* in the late 1980s, these overlaps become more pronounced as the Hindu Right gained in strength politically through the 1980s and 1990s. Arvind Rajagopal has argued that while there was no causal relationship or shared logic between Hindu nationalism and neo-liberalisation, there was an opportunistic alliance between the two.[20]

Thus, despite Tharoor and Banker's commercial success, Hindu mythology remained a rare sight on Indian English fiction lists until 2010. The commercial

14. Suman Gupta, *Consumable Texts in Contemporary India: Uncultured Books and Bibliographical Sociology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015): 23.
15. Shashi Tharoor, 'Mining the Mahabharata', in *Bookless in Baghdad and Other Writings about Reading*, Kindle version (Penguin Viking, 2005).
16. Anusha Parthasarthy, 'A Bankable Storyteller', *The Hindu*, March 1, 2013, accessed October 7, 2024, http://www.thehindu.com/books/books-authors/a-bankable-storyteller/article4465528.ece.
17. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton University Press, 2007): 84–85.
18. Kavita Krishnan, in Chandra, *Classic Popular*, 40.
19. Chandra, *Classic Popular,* 37.
20. Rajagopal, *Politics after Television*, 3.

successes of Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* (2010–13) and Devdutt Pattanaik's mythological guidebooks in the Indian market seemingly convinced English publishers of the commercial viability of publishing mythological retellings in their fiction lists, leading to a wave of commercial books adapting Hindu myths in the early 2010s in genres like science fiction, fantasy, speculative fiction and graphic novels.[21] These books or authors did not, and do not, necessarily share ideological goals with the Hindu Right, but their messages at times do overlap. Pattanaik takes a centrist stance where he critiques and parodies Hindutva for enacting 'political monotheism', while also critiquing and parodying the ideological opponents to Hindutva and, as I discuss below, normalising Hindu history in his work and linking Indian culture to a normative Sanskritic antiquity and Hindu mythos. Conversely, he also gets critiqued and challenged by Right-wing magazines like *Swarajya*.[22] This contradictory and seemingly untenable ideological manoeuvring helps Pattanaik position himself in the political centre using a pedagogical mode that draws on earlier popular retellings like those of Rajagopalachari, ACK and the guidebook, as I argue below, where the ideological positions do not need to cohere, but they do need to be informative.

Telling stories, writing guidebooks: *Jaya* as a *Mahabharata* guidebook

What is so distinctive about Pattanaik and the way he retells Hindu mythology in general, and the *Mahabharata* in particular? What makes him so popular? Pattanaik's stylistic difference from earlier retellings lies in his ability to simplify the narrative, appropriating narrative strategies from earlier prose retellings, while collating and presenting contextual information collected from a variety of sources—legitimate and dubious—into the form of a manual or guidebook for a middle-class audience. As a statement on his homepage reads: 'Devdutt Pattanaik writes on relevance of mythology in modern times, especially in areas of management, governance and leadership.'[23] Blurbs in Pattanaik's earliest books boast of an 'unorthodox approach

21. Sunaina Kumar, 'The Pied Piper of Meluha', Tehelka, February 9, 2013, http://web.archive.org/web/20160419142729/www.tehelka.com/2013/04/the-pied-piper-of-meluha/; Emma Dawson Varughese, *Reading New India* (Bloomsbury, 2013); Emma Dawson Varughese, *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-Millennial Receptions of 'Weird' Narratives* (Routledge, 2017); Sharma, 'Expanding Worlds'. However, some, like Amish Tripathi and Narendra Kohli, benefited from governmental patronage from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led central government. Tripathi was appointed head of the Nehru Centre in London in 2019, the Government of India's flagship cultural centre abroad, while Kohli, the popular author of *Abhyday* (1989) and the *Mahasamar* (1988–2000) series—*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* retellings in Hindi, respectively—was awarded the prestigious Padma Shri award for literature by the BJP government.
22. Devdutt Pattanaik, 'Is Hinduism the Same as Hindutva?', Devdutt blog, March 29, 2017, accessed September 20, 2024, https://devdutt.com/articles/is-hinduism-the-same-as-hindutva/; Devdutt Pattanaik, 'A Savage Civilisation', Devdutt blog, October 20, 2019, accessed September 20, 2024, https://devdutt.com/articles/a-savage-civilisation/; Devdutt Pattanaik, 'How Hindutva Threatens the History of Hindus', Devdutt blog, July 6, 2020, accessed September 20, 2024, https://devdutt.com/articles/how-hindutva-threatens-the-history-of-hindus/; Anustup Basu, *Hindutva as Political Monotheism* (Duke University Press, 2020); Aravindan Neelakandan, 'Why Devdutt Pattanaik Is Mostly Wrong', Swarajyamag, June 29, 2016, accessed September 20, 2024, https://swarajyamag.com/culture/why-devdutt-pattanaik-is-mostly-wrong; David Frawley, 'Can Devdutt Pattanaik Really Save Hinduism From Western Distortions?', Swarajyamag, January 1, 2017, accessed September 20, 2024, https://swarajyamag.com/culture/can-devdutt-pattanaik-really-save-hinduism-from-western-distortions; Abhinav Agarwal, 'Distortions, Errors, Misrepresentations—Devdutt Pattanaik's Mahabharata', IndiaFacts blog, August 28, 2019, accessed September 20, 2024, http://indiafacts.org/distortions-errors-misrepresentations-devdutt-pattanaiks-mahabharata/.
23. "Homepage Devdutt Pattanaik," n.d., http://devdutt.com.

[which] has been widely appreciated' and that 'he has tried to assimilate the various strands—mythology, sociology, philosophy—which have gone in the making of the goddess of the Hindu pantheon'.[24] In this section, I outline Pattanaik's oeuvre of mythological guidebooks, and focus especially on how Pattanaik's *Jaya* appropriates narrative strategies from older prose retellings of the *Mahabharata* while deploying the guidebook format to display contextual information, easily accessible as bullet points in chapter end-boxes. I argue that in collating this vast array of information as a quasi-encyclopaedia, the guidebook presents a vision of a national community which reinscribes centre and margin hierarchies and legitimises Hindu nationalist claims and logic, while enacting and foregrounding the textual and discursive multiplicity of the *Mahabharata* narrative.

A textbook is a particular reconstruction of knowledge that seeks to appear transparent, authorised and authoritative.[25] A guidebook or a manual, Gupta has argued, is a presentation of '*an existing area of knowledge* in an organised fashion, predominantly for the institutional purposes of learning and teaching', like a textbook, but unlike a textbook, directed towards a specific objective—setting up a personal computer, for instance.[26] Drawing on this particular definition of guidebooks and manuals, we can argue that Pattanaik's work falls roughly into four broad categories: mythological guidebooks centred around a particular god or goddess (Shiva (1997, 2011), Vishnu (1999, 2011), Ganesha (2011), Lakshmi (2003), among others); mythological narratives retold as guidebooks (*Jaya*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* (2013), *My Gita* (2015), *Olympus* (2016), among others); manuals centred on specific goals (business management: *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach to Management* (2014) and *Leadership Sutra: An Indian Approach to Power* (2016), wealth accumulation: *Success Sutra: An Indian Approach to Wealth* (2015), and learning: *Talent Sutra: An Indian Approach to Learning* (2016); and topical manuals (on topics like culture (2017), faith (2019), yoga (2019), marriage (2020), etc).[27] There is also some amount of overlap in the content of the different guidebooks as Pattanaik culls and organises stories and interpretive points from his earlier books for his goal-centric and topical manuals. His guidebooks circulate across the high and low ends of the book market. In English, they are published by reputed publishers like Penguin Random House India, Harper Collins India and, more recently, Aleph. They are easily available at major bookstores across the country, possess high production values, and are priced within a comfortable middle range for the Indian English book publishing market, ranging from a relatively

24. Devdutt Pattanaik, *Hanuman: An Introduction* (Vakils, Feffer & Simons, 2001); Devdutt Pattanaik, *Devi: The Mother-Goddess, An Introduction* (Vakils, Feffer & Simons, 2002).

25. John Issitt, 'Reflections on the Study of Textbooks', *History of Education: Journal of the History of Education Society* 33, no. 6 (2004): 683–96, 685, https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760042000277834; Gupta, *Consumable Texts*, 100.

26. Gupta, *Consumable Texts*, 100–1.

27. On Shiva: Devdutt Pattanaik, *Shiva: An Introduction* (Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd., 1997); Devdutt Pattanaik, *7 Secrets of Shiva* (Westland, 2011). On Vishnu: Devdutt Pattanaik, *Vishnu: An Introduction* (Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd., 1999); Devdutt Pattanaik, *7 Secrets of Vishnu* (Westland, 2011). On Ganesha-Devdutt Pattanaik: *99 Thoughts on Ganesha* (Jaico Publishing House, 2011). On Lakshmi-Devdutt Pattanaik, *Lakshmi: The Goddess of Wealth and Fortune, an Introduction* (Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd., 2002). On culture: Devdutt Pattanaik, *Culture: 50 Insights from Mythology* (Harper Element India and Indus Source Books, 2017). On faith: Devdutt Pattanaik, *Faith: 40 Insights from Mythology* (HarperCollins India, 2019). On yoga: Devdutt Pattanaik, *Yoga Mythology: 64 Asanas and Their Stories* (HarperCollins India, 2019). On marriage: Devdutt Pattanaik, *Marriage: 100 Stories Around India's Favourite Ritual* (Rupa & Co., 2021).

modest ₹200 to a relatively expensive ₹600. Furthering his reach with Indian audiences, most of his books, including *Jaya*, have been translated into Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Telugu, Malayalam, Tamil and Kannada, and they do not differ from their source material. While all the books have been incredibly successful, his retelling of the *Mahabharata* has been amongst his highest sellers. *Jaya* was the highest selling of his books published by Penguin Random House India, having sold at least 130,000 copies since it was first published, a massive figure for the industry.[28]

To retell the *Mahabharata*, *Jaya* appropriates older prose story-telling form of mythological retellings while also appropriating the manual format to lay out existing narratives in an organised fashion. It echoes narrative motifs of the Sanskrit text as well as earlier, popular retellings like Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*. Jaya is divided into 18 sections or 'books', echoing the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* (and especially the Northern recensions and the modern critical edition), which comprises of 18 *parva*s or books. The progression of the sections and the chapters contained within them is linear and different from the arrangement of the Sanskrit *parva*s. For instance, the first eight books draw most of their plot from the *Ādiparva*, whereas the five war *parva*s are covered within three books. Pattanaik reformulates the plot of the *Mahabharata* into a linear progression of plot events with chapters arranged in thematic clusters. The Sanskrit narrative is also invoked by including the frame story of the *Mahabharata* in the prologue, i.e. Janamejaya's performance of the snake sacrifice and of the *Mahabharata* narrative as part of the same sacrifice. While Janamejaya is mostly forgotten, each 'book' begins with a short dialogue addressed to Janamejaya which also serves as a teaser for what is to come. For instance, Book 6, entitled 'Marriage' (which narrates the story of Draupadi's *swayamvar*), begins with the dialogue, "'*Janamejaya, in your family, a mother asked her sons to share a wife*'", on its title page.[29]

Jaya not only echoes the Sanskrit text, but also appropriates narrative arrangements of earlier mythological retellings, most notably Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*. *Jaya*'s 18 books are further subdivided into 108 short chapters—Rajagopalachari has 107.[30] Similarly, like in Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*, each chapter's title encapsulates the main plot point in the chapter (e.g. 'Gambling Match', 'Disrobing of Draupadi', 'Gandhari's Curse', etc.). Both *Jaya* and Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata* hit the same narrative beats: they introduce the main protagonists and their ancestors; the burgeoning rivalry between the Kuru cousins leading to early attempts on Bhima's life; the attempt on the lives of all the Pandavas and their mother, which forces them into exile; their marriage to Draupadi; rise and fall from power; exile; war and its aftermath.

However, a guidebook is supposed to organise an existing area of knowledge, which, in Pattanaik's retelling, includes traditions excluded from the normative, Sanskritic and/or Anglophone narratives of the *Mahabharata*. As a result, *Jaya*

28. Pallavi Narayan, email conversation, June 7, 2021. The source for the numbers is Nielsen BookScan India. This is not a market measure, but a defined panel, and the sales data reflect only sales through that defined panel.
29. Devdutt Pattanaik, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (Penguin, 2010): 85, italicised in the original.
30. 108 is also an auspicious number in modern Hinduism.

includes more stories from the Sanskrit narrative than earlier prose retellings, as well as stories that are not in the Sanskrit narratives. For instance, compared to Rajagopalachari's *Mahabharata*, which only narrates the Pandavas' slaying of Baka while fleeing from their cousins before Draupadi's swayamvar, Pattanaik includes more episodes covering the Pandavas' experiences while in training with Drona and in exile, like the story of Hidimba and Hidimbi, the meeting with a Gandharva king and, most significantly, the story of Eklavya.[31] Furthermore, the first book titled 'Ancestors' covers the genealogy of the Kuru line starting from the birth of Chandra's son to Budh's marriage, Shakuntala, Bharat, Yayati and Madhavi. Here, Pattanaik includes two figures who do not appear in the modern critical edition of the *Mahabharata*, i.e. Chandra and Budh, so as to foreground the Bharat lineage as the lunar dynasty.[32] In another instance, the chapter 'Beheading Gaya' is about a Gandharva called Gaya who seeks protection from Arjuna because Krishna wants to behead him, leading to an impasse between Arjuna and Krishna that is resolved only when the gods intervene.[33] This episode is also not from the Sanskrit narrative. However, the majority of Pattanaik's textual work where he draws on different points of information happens in the end-box.

At the end of each chapter, there is an end-box with information listed in bullet-points, much like in a guidebook or manual, providing exegesis for their respective chapters along with supplementary information on a range of topics with no underlying thematic link apart from the chapter that they come after. Pattanaik draws on a vast array of sources to contextualise and rearticulate lessons in his mythological retellings, constructing a dense web of connections that sustains and expands the readers' information on myths without exploring any single dilemma too deeply. This is in contrast to Indian language retellings in print and performance, which often tend to explore specific dilemmas from the *Mahabharata* narrative rather than strive to retell the narrative in its entirety. Even works like B.R. Chopra's *Mahabharat* (1988–90) teleserial, or Narendra Kohli's *Mahasamar* (1988–2000), which claim to retell at least the central narrative of the Kuru civil war, often stop the narrative flow to focus on specific dilemmas like Draupadi's disrobing at the Game of Dice.[34] Pattanaik uses these end-boxes to recontextualise characters, flag regional variations of the episode narrated in the chapter, and provide ethical/moral parables and interpretive comments, creating what Gupta calls 'quasi-encyclopaedic' sections that 'seem to simply give information on a range of topics which are not thematically linked—hence akin to an encyclopaedia—and yet in a manner that is so haphazard and unsystematic that these have no plausible encyclopaedic functions—hence quasi-encyclopaedic'.[35] These boxes cover diverse topics in a bullet-point format without any citational evidence to support their claims, precluding verification and/or further research in an attitude that Gupta sums up as '*make sure you have points,*

31. Rajagopalachari, *Mahabharata*, 52–63; Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 56–86.
32. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 11–14.
33. Ibid., 41, 120–22.
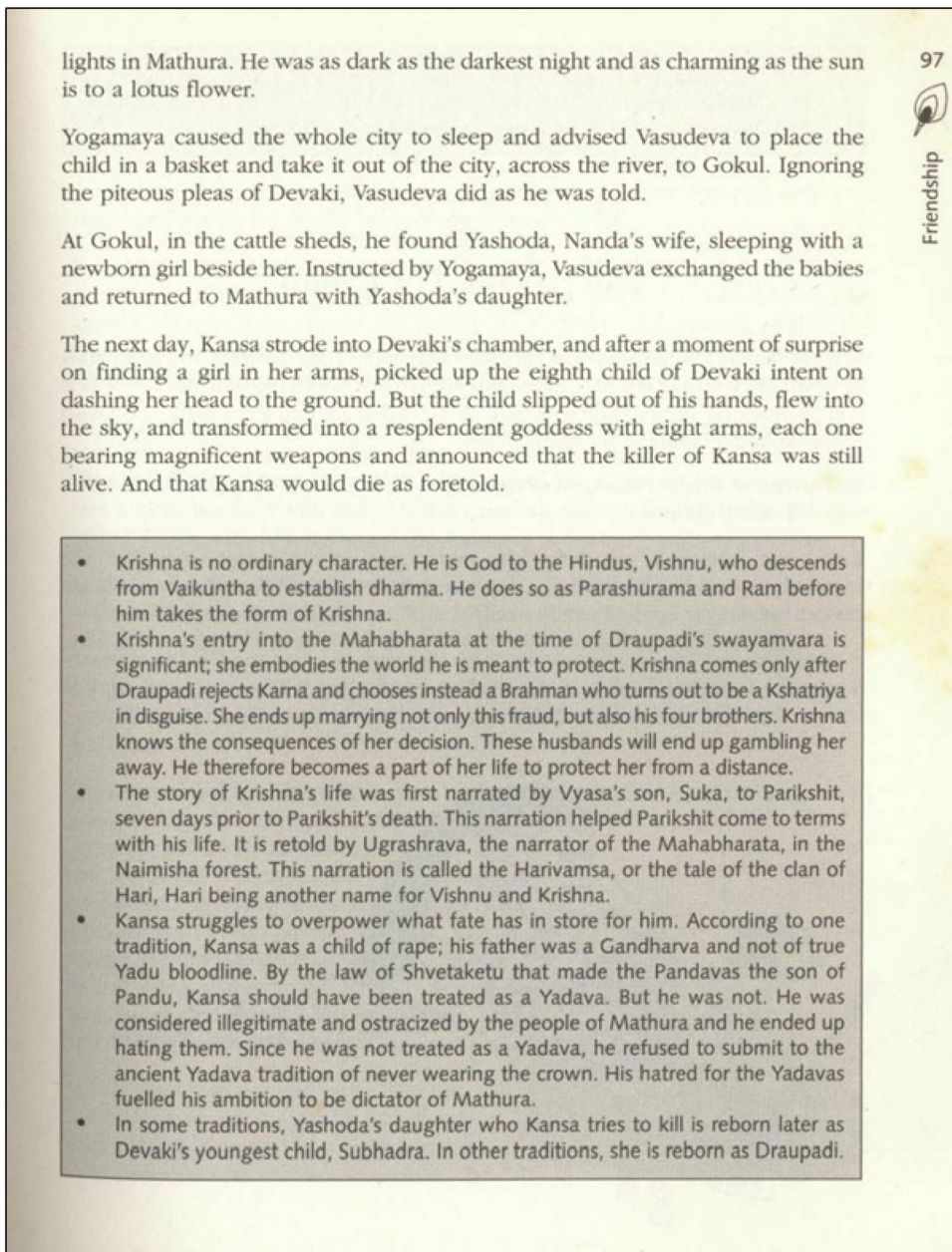34. Sharma, 'Many *Mahabharatas*'.
35. Gupta, *Consumable Texts*, 120.

lights in Mathura. He was as dark as the darkest night and as charming as the sun is to a lotus flower.

Yogamaya caused the whole city to sleep and advised Vasudeva to place the child in a basket and take it out of the city, across the river, to Gokul. Ignoring the piteous pleas of Devaki, Vasudeva did as he was told.

At Gokul, in the cattle sheds, he found Yashoda, Nanda's wife, sleeping with a newborn girl beside her. Instructed by Yogamaya, Vasudeva exchanged the babies and returned to Mathura with Yashoda's daughter.

The next day, Kansa strode into Devaki's chamber, and after a moment of surprise on finding a girl in her arms, picked up the eighth child of Devaki intent on dashing her head to the ground. But the child slipped out of his hands, flew into the sky, and transformed into a resplendent goddess with eight arms, each one bearing magnificent weapons and announced that the killer of Kansa was still alive. And that Kansa would die as foretold.

- Krishna is no ordinary character. He is God to the Hindus, Vishnu, who descends from Vaikuntha to establish dharma. He does so as Parashurama and Ram before him takes the form of Krishna.
- Krishna's entry into the Mahabharata at the time of Draupadi's swayamvara is significant; she embodies the world he is meant to protect. Krishna comes only after Draupadi rejects Karna and chooses instead a Brahman who turns out to be a Kshatriya in disguise. She ends up marrying not only this fraud, but also his four brothers. Krishna knows the consequences of her decision. These husbands will end up gambling her away. He therefore becomes a part of her life to protect her from a distance.
- The story of Krishna's life was first narrated by Vyasa's son, Suka, to Parikshit, seven days prior to Parikshit's death. This narration helped Parikshit come to terms with his life. It is retold by Ugrashrava, the narrator of the Mahabharata, in the Naimisha forest. This narration is called the Harivamsa, or the tale of the clan of Hari, Hari being another name for Vishnu and Krishna.
- Kansa struggles to overpower what fate has in store for him. According to one tradition, Kansa was a child of rape; his father was a Gandharva and not of true Yadu bloodline. By the law of Shvetaketu that made the Pandavas the son of Pandu, Kansa should have been treated as a Yadava. But he was not. He was considered illegitimate and ostracized by the people of Mathura and he ended up hating them. Since he was not treated as a Yadava, he refused to submit to the ancient Yadava tradition of never wearing the crown. His hatred for the Yadavas fuelled his ambition to be dictator of Mathura.
- In some traditions, Yashoda's daughter who Kansa tries to kill is reborn later as Devaki's youngest child, Subhadra. In other traditions, she is reborn as Draupadi.

Figure 1. End-box from Chapter 32, 'Krishna Enters'. Image taken by author.

don't worry about coherent arguments and developing a sustained and rational perspective'.[36]

For instance, Figure 1 shows the end-box from Chapter 32, 'Krishna Enters', narrating Krishna in multiple contexts—Krishna as a divine incarnation of Vishnu, his entry in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, and the Krishna mythos from the *Harivamsa*

---

36. Ibid., 123, emphasis in original.

which forms the central narrative (absent in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*) of the cult of Krishna devotion. In the process, Pattanaik reinterprets Krishna's entry in the *Mahabharata* in a novel way, as his urge to protect Draupadi, changing the motivation for a major character and plot point in the narrative. Furthermore, the end-box expands on the narrative around Krishna by including extra information, exploring and contextualising other characters related to the Krishna mythos—the main antagonist, Kansa, and Krishna's foster mother, Yashoda—citing 'alternative' narrative traditions, delineating their difference from an already assumed normative 'mainstream' narrative.[37] The reader gets a new, perhaps more convincing, character motivation, while also getting more information collated in one place. The mythological guidebook thus updates narrative information and ensures that the readers possess the salient points, rather than framing coherent arguments or building a sustained narrative perspective.

The end-boxes also create a hitherto unseen zone for *Mahabharata* retellings, bridging putative 'variants' to their 'main' narrative. Not only are these variants from the margins of an imagined 'mainstream' narrative presented in the main text, but they are also from the margins of the conceptual geography of urban Indians living in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata and Bengaluru. Many of the 'variants' that Pattanaik maps are often from geographical and/or epistemological margins, i.e. from areas outside major urban centres, and usually described as folktales or folklore qualified by location, typically with the name of the state that they hail from—'folktale from Gujarat', 'Punjabi folklore', 'Oriya *Mahabharata*', 'folk play from Maharashtra', 'Bhil *Mahabharata*', 'Tamil *Mahabharata*', 'one South Indian folktale', Terukkuttu in Tamil Nadu, introducing readers to the Sanskrit or Sanskritic 'Big Tradition' as well as regional, non-Sanskritic 'little' traditions and modern retellings.[38]

Enacting and foregrounding the multiplicity of variant *Mahabharata* retellings is important to Pattanaik as he creates a dense zone of connections that imagine a shared Hindu-Indian community. As Pattanaik writes:

> With so many retellings and so widespread a popularity, some argue that the Mahabharata actually means the tale of the greatness of India, and not the great epic of India, for it contains all that has made Indians what they are—a tolerant people who value inner wisdom over outer achievement.[39]

Pattanaik's geographical siting of the multiple *Mahabharata* narratives enacts mythology and geography as a 'joint imaginative and descriptive undertaking' of an imagined national community, in a manner hitherto unseen in English prose retellings, while conflating being Hindu with being Indian.[40] Yet, at the same time, they reveal the hierarchies of belonging within the nation—i.e. 'mainstream' in the main text, 'variant' in the end-boxes. Thus, while Pattanaik does bring the peripheries of the nation into an imagined, Indian English 'mainstream' by documenting them in his popular retellings, he simultaneously reinstates them at the literal margins of the

37. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 97.
38. Ibid., 111, 116, 184, 185, 202, 205, 280, 284.
39. Ibid., xiv.
40. Diana L. Eck, *India: A Sacred Geography* (Harmony Books, 2012): 53.

text. Thus, while multiplicity of cultural genealogies is foregrounded, it is still hierarchical, rather than flattened, and Sanskrit is imagined as an *ur*-text or *ur*-source, rather than as one referent amongst many.[41]

To enact the imagination of this national community, in *Jaya*, Pattanaik draws upon a vast repertoire of references that simultaneously educates his readers, while also legitimising more suspect disciplines and pseudo-scientific methods. References range from religious practices, folklore, Sanskrit texts, disciplines like history and anthropology and modern literature, to more suspect disciplines like astrology, to the merely anecdotal—'Most people believe', 'Historians believe', 'Playwrights suggest', 'Anthropologists believe', 'Vedic scholars', 'Astrologers revealed', 'Many scholars believe', etc., pepper the text.[42] This particular approach accords serious consideration to pseudo-scientific fields like astrology, or political ones of 'Hindu history'.[43] Utilising works of Hindu historians, for instance, Pattanaik tries to contextualise the *Mahabharata* narrative 'historically', using scientific reasoning to quixotically deduce dates within an epic narrative:

> B. N. Narahari Achar has determined the date of the war using Planetarium software, beginning with Krishna's journey to Hastina-puri and ending with Bhishma's death. He concludes that Krishna left on 26 Sep 3067 BCE, reaching Hastina-puri on 28 Sep and leaving Karna on 9 Oct. A solar eclipse occurred with the new moon on 14 Oct, with Saturn at Rohini and Jupiter at Revati exactly as given in the epic. The war began on 22 Nov 3067 BCE. Bhishma expired on 17 Jan 3066 BCE (Magh Shukla Ashtami), the winter solstice occurring on 13 Jan 3066. It must be kept in mind that 5000 years ago, the date of the winter solstice was very different from what it is today; the current night sky is different from the one seen by our ancestors.[44]

Moreover, Pattanaik also plots locations from the narratives onto the geography of the modern Indian nation—'Barnawa, located in Meerut district, close to Hastina-puri, is identified as Varanavata, where the palace of wax was built for the Pandavas', or 'Bairat, located in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan, has been identified as Viratnagar or Matsya'.[45] Like the Hindu historians and their histories, Pattanaik slips between the profane and the sacred, bringing the two planes together both spatially and temporally.[46] Varnavata, Matsya, Hastinapura as also Kurukshetra, the mythic battlefield and Haryana town, are simultaneously mythic kingdoms and small Indian towns. Temporal co-ordinates from epic time—'an "absolute past", a time of founding fathers and heroes, separated by an unbridgeable gap from the real time of the *present day* (the present day of the creators, the performers and the audience of

---

41. Ramanujan, for instance, argues against assuming that the Sanskrit text(s) is the *ur* version of the Ramkatha tradition since it is often not the version that is carried from one language to another: Ramanujan, *Collected Essays*, 134.
42. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, xv, 24, 45, 75, 80, 140, 296. Apart from 'Astrologers revealed', all of the ascriptions appear in the end-boxes.
43. Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Appeal of Hindu History', in *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*, ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (Sage Publications, 1995): 369–88.
44. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 314.
45. Ibid., 78, 202.
46. Gyanendra Pandey, 'The New Hindu History', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 17, no. s1 (1994): 97–112, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856409408723218.

epic songs)'[47]—are mapped, with planetarium software, into real time of the present day, while mythical spatial co-ordinates are mapped onto the geographical space of the Indian nation, bridging a gap that only Hindu history has hitherto tried to bridge.

Pattanaik distinguishes his retellings from other retellings, at least structurally, by adapting the guidebook form, which allows him to weave in a wealth of information, simultaneously expanding contexts and flattening text and subtext. This flattening leads to normalising Hindutva (pseudo) scientific and historical discourses, while maintaining a normative Sanskrit-vernacular binary as a centre-margin dichotomy within the imagined Indian nation. The narrative thus is reimagined and situated firmly within the discursive framework of the postcolonial, Hindu Indian nation-state, much in the same way as dharma is rearticulated to situate the narrative within the framework of neoliberal material relations and discursive regimes.

Retelling *Mahabharata*, reconfiguring dharma

Undergirding *Jaya*'s vision of an Indian culture that celebrates a hierarchised multiplicity is its recalibration of dharma as an imperative of neoliberal work ethic. Dharmic dilemmas are a significant leitmotif in the *Mahabharata* narrative and form an important aspect of the aesthetic pleasure derived from the narrative tradition. The conflict between *nivṛttidharma* and *pravṛttidharma* is one of the leitmotifs of the *Mahabharata* narrative, if not *the* main narrative engine.[48] The Sanskrit *Mahabharata*(s) repeatedly reminds its audience that 'Dharma is subtle' and is 'thin and slippery as a fine silk sari, elusive as a will-o'-the-wisp, internally inconsistent as well as disguised, hidden, masked. People try again and again to do the right thing, and fail and fail, until they no longer know what the right thing is'.[49] This dilemma becomes a significant leitmotif in retellings and a matter of concern in commentaries.[50] Pattanaik, however, reinterprets dharma within individualistic terms reinforcing the neoliberal imperative for individuals to self-regulate.

47. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, by M.M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981): 218, emphasis in the original.

48. According to Arti Dhand, *pravṛttidharma* is concerned with ritual and social obligations and norms while *nivṛttidharma* is geared towards personal spiritual ends. Dhand argues that the central conflict in the *Mahabharata* is not which is preferred—that is *nivṛttidharma*—but how does one reconcile the two within a singular system: Arti Dhand, *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: Sexual Ideology in the Mahabharata* (State University of New York Press, 2008): 21–53. For more on the dharmic dilemma in *Mahabharata* narratives, see W.J. Johnson, 'Introduction', in *The Sauptikaparvan of the Mahābhārata: The Massacre at Night*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, 1998): ix–xli; Alf Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata: A Reader's Guide to the Education of the Dharma King* (University of Chicago Press, 2001); Adam Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder and the Political in Ancient India: The Āpaddharmaparvan of the Mahābhārata, Vol. 28*, Brill's Indological Library (Brill, 2007); Emily T. Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma: Ethics and the Aesthetics of Suffering in the Mahabharata* (Oxford University Press, 2012); Joanne P. Waghorne, *Images of Dharma: The Epic World of C. Rajagopalachari* (Chanakya Publications, 1985); Laetitia Zecchini, 'Dharma Reconsidered: The Inappropriate Poetry of Arun Kolatkar in Sarpa Satra', in *Religion in Literature and Film in South Asia*, ed. Diana Dimitrova (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 131–52; Narendra Kohli, *Jahāṃ Hai Dharma, Vahīṃ Hai Jai* (Vāṇī Prakāśan, 1995); Alf Hiltebeitel, *Dharma: Its Early History in Law, Religion, and Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2011), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195394238.001.0001.

49. Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (The Penguin Press, 2009): 278; Ramanujan, *Collected Essays*, 22–23, 176–77.

50. See, for instance, B.K. Matilal, *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahabharata* (Motilal Banarsidass/IIAS, 1989); B.K. Matilal, *Ethics and Epics: The Collected Essays of Bimal Krishna Matilal*, ed. Jonardon Ganeri (Oxford University Press, 2002); Malinar, 'Bhagavadgītā'; Hiltebeitel, *Rethinking the Mahābhārata*; Bowles, *Dharma, Disorder*; Hudson, *Disorienting Dharma*.

In a series of lectures published as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault argues that neoliberalism conceives the economic individual, or *homo oeconomicus*, as an entrepreneur of himself. Foucault argues that neoliberalism reconfigures the *homo oeconomicus* from a partner in wage exchange to an 'entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital…his own producer…the source of [his] earnings'.[51] Drawing on Foucault, Wendy Brown has argued that managing the self becomes an integral part of individuation in contemporary neoliberalism. While Foucault's theorisation of the economic individual would suggest individual-entrepreneurs in constant competition, Brown argues that in the age of financialisation, economic actors have been socialised—through 'teamwork, responsibilisation, and stakeholder consensus'—away from pure competition in a limited economic field, to explicitly 'governed, "responsibilized", and managed subjects' in economic *and* political fields.[52] Under neoliberalism, individuals have to manage *and* control themselves in order to maximise their own earnings and satisfaction.

Neoliberal economic policies, and the economic liberalisation they brought about, also led to the creation of a new Indian middle class, affecting both how the individual was conceived and the nature of their work. In India specifically, with the institution of economic reforms and the growth of privatisation and multinationals, the middle class changed in specific ways. Leela Fernandes argues that the 'new' Indian middle class:

> is not 'new' in terms of its structural or social basis. In other words, its 'newness' does not refer to upwardly mobile segments of the population entering the middle class. Rather, its newness refers to a process of production of a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of liberalization. At a structural level, this group largely encompasses English-speaking urban white-collar segments of the middle class who are benefiting from new employment opportunities (particularly in private-sector employment).[53]

With liberalisation, the private sector—with its promise of higher salaries—emerged as a major employer, represented in the popular imaginary by multinational companies, especially information technology (IT) and IT enabled services (ITES).[54] With multinational companies opening offices and/or joint ventures in India and offering well-paying jobs to Indian graduates, career priorities and trajectories clearly shifted towards the corporate sector, especially for upper-caste, middle-class workers.[55] The displaced nature of work in multinational corporations, especially in the IT/ITES industry, resulted in Indians often working with teams from different

---

51. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Macmillan, 2008): 226.

52. Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 70–71; Brown defines responsibilisation as 'forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider—reconfigur[ing] the correct comportment of the subject from one naturally driven by satisfying interests to one forced to engage in a particular form of self-sustenance that meshes with the morality of the state and the health of the economy': Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 84.

53. Leela Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class: Democratic Politics in an Era of Economic Reform* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006): xviii.

54. Upadhya, 'Introduction', 9–10; Carol Upadhya, 'Software and the "New" Middle Class in the "New India"', in *Elite and Everyman: The Cultural Politics of the Indian Middle Classes*, ed. Amita Baviskar and Raka Ray (Routledge, 2011): 167–92.

55. Fernandes, *India's New Middle Class*, 104.

countries, and, more importantly, work cultures, cementing the importance of acquiring fluency in English as a crucial skill to gain profitable employment in the new economy for the individual worker. Furthermore, given the multi-sited nature of the service sector, cross-cultural interactions became an inescapable reality of the new workplace. As a result, cross-cultural training has become *de rigeur* in Indian corporate workplace training regimes to help workers maximise their responsibilities, and thus earnings.[56]

Based on Geert Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work-Related Values*, cross-cultural training was designed ostensibly to train workers to be sensitive to transnational cultural contexts to ensure a smooth and efficient workplace, while codifying certain practices as cultural norms intrinsic within 'WASP' (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) and 'extended family' cultures. The training itself utilised outdated and orientalist tropes of cultural understanding. Two oppositional, idealised cultural norms were constructed—Western and non-Western.[57] Carol Upadhya outlines one such instance at 'a communication skills programme that was offered by one of the top soft skills consultants in Bangalore [now Bengaluru] for employees of the overseas software development centre of an American IT major [company]'.[58] A cross-cultural trainer outlined the cultural differences as:

1. Pluralistic—the 'WASP' cultures (Australian, Canadian, American) characterised by:
   - Individualism
   - Personal achievement
   - Orientation to career
   - Materialism
   - Changes as progress
   - Lifestyle diversity
2. Extended family cultures—(Latin American, African, Middle Eastern, Indian) characterised by:
   - Social structure built around the family
   - Importance of where you are from
   - Family as source of social identity
   - Business carried out within a network
   - Minimal social change
   - Sharp gender differences
   - Tradition-bound
   - Religious.[59]

The trainer further argued that 'corporate cultures around the world are merging into a common "global corporate culture" model and suggested that we need to

56. Smitha Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian: Gender and Culture in a New Transnational Class* (Duke University Press, 2011): 53–82.
57. Carol Upadhya, 'Management of Culture and Managing through Culture in the Indian Software Outsourcing Industry', in *In an Outpost of the Global Economy: Work and Workers in India's Information Technology Industry*, ed. Carol Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi (Routledge, 2008): 104–5.
58. Ibid., 110.
59. Ibid., 111.

accept this global culture because it is now the dominant one'.[60] The underlying message in these training modules was that Indian workers needed to aspire to 'Western' cultural norms in order to create an efficient work culture. Indian workers are encouraged to continue subscribing to 'Indian' cultural norms and practices while also placing those norms secondary to Western culture in the brave new world of globalising capital and service flows.

The 'new' Indian worker is expected to perform 'Western' cultural norms to burnish the company's image as 'modern' and/or 'global' and consequently advance their own individual careers, without changing their 'core' Indian culture. This would help them establish good working relations with their Western clients and colleagues, without disturbing underlying power dynamics at home.[61] For instance, the software industry is marketed as particularly friendly for women to join as workers since it provides them with an ostensibly safe and secure working environment in the form of a securitised work campus which also surveils and polices workers' bodies. Performing a sort of liberalism—for instance, advertising the participation of women in the workforce while sustaining structural gender inequalities in the workplace—helped in establishing good working relations with their Western clients and colleagues, without disturbing the underlying power dynamics at home.[62] In fact, retaining that 'core', simplified, and often Hindu performance of Indianness is preferable to perform cultural difference to colleagues not from India, while also resisting the West when it 'threatens [for example] existing notions of a good woman and a good family'.[63] The stage is set for a person (and brand) like Devdutt Pattanaik, who can articulate and explain Hindu (and thus 'Indian') culture to the neoliberal worker, training them to perform an updated, differentiated, essentialised Indianness in a globalised workplace that reinforces existing caste and gender hierarchies while simultaneously inculcating a neoliberal 'work ethic' in the worker.

Dharma, for Pattanaik, is the triumph of 'civilisation' over barbarism within the individual, where civilisation—and thus dharma—becomes a self-managing, self-disciplining mechanism geared towards helping the individual attain greater profits within a larger political and economic field. Astika, the character that brings Janamejaya's snake sacrifice to an abrupt end in the *Mahabharata*, declares at the very beginning of *Jaya*, '[D]harma is not about justice; it is about empathy and wisdom. Dharma is not about defeating others, it is about conquering ourselves. Everybody wins in dharma'.[64] In the *Bhagavad Gita* section in *Jaya*, Krishna's sermon on detachment from desire in one's actions is transformed into living with 'others

60. Ibid., 111.
61. Ibid., 112; Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian*, 65–72.
62. Sanjukta Mukherjee, 'Producing the Knowledge Professional: Gendered Geographies of Alienation in India's New High-Tech Workplace', in *In an Outpost of the Global Economy: Work and Workers in India's Information Technology Industry*, ed. Carol Upadhya and A.R. Vasavi (Routledge, 2008): 62; Smitha Radhakrishnan, drawing on fieldwork done with IT professionals in India, the Silicon Valley and South Africa between 2004 and 2007, notes, 'In order to enact a respectable femininity in service of family and nation, professional women must respect a set of boundaries that delimit how they travel between the private sphere of the home and the public sphere of work and leisure in their everyday lives. Here too, strong notions of appropriate, positive "exposure" available in the IT workplace, and inappropriate behaviors and actions that undermine the family, set up the terms of the delicate balance that IT women must strike': Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian*, 164.
63. Radhakrishnan, *Appropriately Indian*, 73–86.
64. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 6.

as a reference point, not oneself'.[65] In the end-box at the end of the chapter on Yudhishthira's consecration as king following the Kuru civil war, Pattanaik writes, 'Dharma is not about winning. It is about empathy and growth'.[66] In *Jaya*, the dilemma is not how can characters follow their dharma in the face of extreme circumstances, but how can characters work while being aware of their responsibility towards the larger team or context within which they are situated.

Barbarism, according to Pattanaik, is '*matsya nyaya*', i.e. might is right. Dharma is 'a society where the mighty care for the meek, and where resources are made available to help even the unfit thrive'. Adharma is when the strong exploit the weak instead of helping them, 'If dharma enables us to outgrow the beast in us, then adharma makes us worse than animals. If dharma takes us towards divinity, then adharma fuels the demonic'.[67] As he argues elsewhere, '[h]umans have the ability to think of others (para-atma) and so can reach the infinite divine (param-atma) beyond the self (jiva-atma). When we do that, we are in line with our potential. This is dharma. When we don't do that, when we are not in line with our potential, we are following adharma'.[68] As Krishna says in *Jaya*, Duryodhana is evil because:

> Duryodhana does not subscribe to dharma. All his actions stem from fear. He helps those who comfort him; he rejects those who threaten him. He behaves like a beast guarding his territory; but he is not a beast, he is human, very much capable of shattering this delusion. His refusal to do so makes him demonic, deserving of no pity.[69]

Pattanaik repeats this later in an end-box:

> The animal mind, the Kaurava mind, is unable to fathom this and hence tenaciously clings to land and is filled with rage and fear till the very end. Krishna's focus is to help the Pandavas outgrow the territorial beast within and realize the divine potential.[70]

Dharma, then, means rejecting the pure individualism of the early neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*, which is interpreted here as animalistic barbarism, in favour of practising self-control and managing one's own desires. This is the only way the individual can be 'in line with [their] potential' and reach the 'infinite divine'. Thus, the irredeemable villainy of the Kuru princes lies in their 'refus[al] to outgrow the animal desire to cling to territory and dominate like an alpha male'. Concomitantly, 'Krishna's focus is to help the Pandavas outgrow the territorial beast within and realize the divine potential', and the Pandavas' heroism lies in 'Krishna help[ing them to]…undergo [this] transformation'.[71] Duryodhana's envy, which is framed as tragic in various retellings, and even as an integral part of his caste dharma in the Sanskrit narrative, is rearticulated here as animalistic desire which stands diametrically opposed to Pattanaik's idea of dharma as an evolutionary, civilising mechanism.

---

65. Ibid., 237.
66. Ibid., 309.
67. Ibid., 346.
68. Devdutt Pattanaik, *Dharma Artha Kama Moksha*, Kindle edition (HarperCollins India, 2021): 55.
69. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 237.
70. Ibid., 284.
71. Ibid., 284.

This formulation allows Pattanaik to deliver parables against unproductive tendencies in a neoliberal workplace, like personal insecurity and interpersonal competitiveness. For instance, the episode of the Brahman teacher, Drona, mutilating the lower-caste Eklavya in order to stop him from besting the upper-caste royal Kuru princes is emptied of the moral dilemmas that have usually accented the episode in the Sanskrit, television or Dalit narratives. Simon Brodbeck, for instance, argues that in the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*, Drona is honour bound to extract his terrible fee from Eklavya to maintain a cycle of curses and boons.[72] The B.R. Chopra TV serial argues, rather uneasily, that Eklavya was in fact committing theft and was duly punished.[73] Dalit pamphlets rearticulate Eklavya as a symbol of Dalit pride in the face of Brahmanical oppression.[74] While *Jaya* frames Drona's actions as hypocritical and discriminatory, even if it was spurred by the promise Drona had made to Arjuna, it also recasts Arjuna as an insecure, and thus incompletely realised, (neoliberal) individual. The chapter notes Arjuna's envy in the main narrative before further highlighting his insecurity and competitiveness, two counterproductive behaviours that should be actively discouraged in the workplace:

> Vyasa portrays Arjuna as a highly insecure and competitive youth. Ekalavya's cut thumb mocks his position as the greatest archer in the world. Through the tale Vyasa demonstrates how greatness need not be achieved by being better than others; it can also be achieved by pulling down others who are better.[75]

Pattanaik expands on this reading in an article, where he explains that Arjuna is a modern-day business family scion—insecure due to the knowledge that birth, rather than ability, put him in line for business ownership—while Eklavya is a metaphor for the petit bourgeois shut out of the Indian haute middle-class milieu due to its provincial upbringing and a concomitant lack of business school credentials and English-language skills:

> Mr. Bakshi works as a manager in a departmental store. He would have been a part of the strategic team but he will never be, because he is not a B-school graduate. No school accepted him because in the group discussion he would only express himself in Hindi. His thoughts were outstanding but those who judged him heard only his language and felt he would not fit in because he did not know English.

> Mr. Bakshi did not learn English because the government schools taught only the local language because the political parties insisted in supporting the regional language over a foreign language, never mind the fact that the children of the politicians went to English schools. Mr. Bakshi is the modern day Ekalavya not quite sure why well-meaning politicians and well-meaning academicians denied him his thumb.[76]

72. Simon Brodbeck, 'Ekalavya and *Mahābhārata* 1.121–28', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 10, no. 1 (2006): 1–34.

73. '*Mahabharat*', Doordarshan, 90, 1988, Ep. 23, 25; Sharma, 'Many *Mahabharatas*', chap. 1.

74. Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics*, Cultural Subordination and the Dalit Challenge 5 (Sage Publications, 2006): 58, 67.

75. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 64–65.

76. Devdutt Pattanaik, 'Management Mythos: *Mahabharata* and the Corporate World', *The Economic Times*, July 8, 2011, accessed September 20, 2024, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/management-mythos-mahabharata-and-the-corporate-world/articleshow/8447291.cms.

Eklavya's story is thus no longer about caste violence or resistance, but the failure of Indian capital to organise itself according to neoliberal tenets of responsibilised governance where the Arjunas of the Indian middle class have erred in their self-control, thus hindering Eklavya in *his* quest to advance himself.

At the same time, the parables for the neoliberal worker remain conservative towards women, retaining an orthodox view of what constitutes a 'good Indian woman'. Reminiscent of the orthodox *streedharma* (dharma for women), dharma is still explicitly meant to control women's sexuality, while unrestrained sexuality is adharmic or barbaric.[77] For instance, Draupadi's beauty threatens control: 'Draupadi's stunning beauty makes the best of men lose all good sense and constantly draws trouble. Even though she is innocent, her beauty arouses all men who end up wanting to hurt and humiliate her because she is chaste and unavailable'.[78] Pattanaik argues that laws and men are needed in order to control a woman's desire and convert her into a respectable wife:

> Vyasa keeps asking what makes a woman a wife. It emerges that it is civilized society with its laws of marital fidelity that makes a woman a wife. But in the forest, there are no rules. Can a woman still be a wife? It is evident through the story of Jayadhrata that neither society nor forest can make a woman a wife; it is only the desire and the discipline of man that can do so. [79]

Dharma for women then is not self-control, but control of their sexuality exercised by men for the greater good of both women and society, lest it lead to cataclysmic civil wars.

The dharma of the ideal neoliberal worker, then, is to not give in to unfettered greed, but rather to find success and profit for themselves and their companies through self-regulation and self-governance. With the liberalisation of the Indian economy, and the rise in private sector jobs for the Indian middle class, IT and ITES workers especially have become part of a globalised workforce—a situation that requires them to constantly self-regulate and upskill to maintain profitability. To do so, these workers are encouraged to adapt specific norms that would allow them to work more efficiently in a globalised workplace, while retaining a seemingly unchanged Indian cultural essence. Pattanaik's retellings reformulate Hindu mythology and cultural norms, symbols and traditions to deliver parables to create a more efficient neoliberal, responsibilised worker.

Conclusion

This essay considers *Jaya* and its material and ideological contexts and effects as mutually co-constitutive to better understand the aesthetic strategies and economic and political projects that would undergird any retelling. Pattanaik has emerged as one of the most popular purveyors of mythology in India today, as his sales figures and social media following would attest. The sheer volume of his creative work spread across print newspapers, books, television, podcasts and audiobooks in

---

77. For more on this see Dhand, *Woman as Fire*, 127–99.
78. Pattanaik, *Jaya*, 205.
79. Ibid., 163.

different languages has made him a ubiquitous cultural presence. Critiqued and lampooned for its simplistic lessons and moralistic tone, Pattanaik's retelling takes form within the cultural and economic contexts of neoliberalism, revealing the multiple and contradictory layers in cultural production in post-millennial, neoliberal India and their impact on narrative traditions. Pattanaik's ideological leanings, for instance, can seem fickle as he gleefully launches invectives against those he perceives as his ideological opponents from across the ideological spectrum (or ends, as he characterises them). *Jaya* breaks from earlier and contemporary *Mahabharata* retellings to include more than the Sanskrit narrative, and yet there is a visual centre-margin hierarchy enacted between the Sanskrit narrative and the 'variants' while also normalising Hindu history and Hindutva narratives. Such contradictions can cohere, formally, because of the guidebook format, where gaining information has greater importance than reflection or analysis. Ideologically, these contradictions are subsumed within the larger project of (re)producing a responsibilised neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*. In the process, Pattanaik goes beyond self-help strategies and/or 'how to get rich' homilies while also appropriating their logic. In retelling the *Mahabharata*, Pattanaik brings forth a new modality of retelling myths for a neoliberal audience which articulates and propagates a neoliberal work ethic along with a negotiated nativism—the mythological guidebook. Seemingly new information is introduced, new meanings invented, and old ones flattened to retell mythology for reproducing the neoliberal *homo oeconomicus*.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

ORCID

Chinmay Sharma　http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0645-1713