

Myth and Modernity in Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Hanuman Chalisa*

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between myth and modernity has become one of the central concerns of contemporary literary and cultural studies. In India, mythological narratives continue to influence social imagination, ethical thought, religious practice, and cultural identity. Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Hanuman Chalisa* emerges within this intellectual and cultural framework as an important modern reinterpretation of a classical devotional text. Pattanaik revisits the *Hanuman Chalisa* composed by Goswami Tulsidas and recontextualizes it for contemporary readers by combining mythology, psychology, philosophy, and cultural commentary. This paper explores how Pattanaik negotiates the tension between mythic tradition and modern sensibility. It examines how symbols associated with Hanuman are transformed into metaphors for emotional resilience, ethical discipline, self-awareness, and social harmony.

The study also investigates Pattanaik's method of mythological interpretation and his attempt to make ancient narratives meaningful within a rapidly changing modern society. Through textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that *My Hanuman Chalisa* does not reject tradition; rather, it reconstructs tradition through modern intellectual frameworks. The work reveals how mythology can continue to function as a living cultural force capable of guiding contemporary individuals through psychological uncertainty and moral fragmentation. The paper argues that Pattanaik's reinterpretation represents an important dialogue between devotional spirituality and modern rational inquiry.

Keywords: Myth, Modernity, Hanuman, Devdutt Pattanaik, Symbolism, Self-Discovery, Bhakti, Indian Mythology, Cultural Identity, Devotional Literature

INTRODUCTION

Indian mythology has remained a vital source of cultural continuity across centuries. Ancient epics, devotional hymns, and sacred narratives continue to shape moral imagination and collective identity in contemporary Indian society. Among these devotional compositions, the *Hanuman Chalisa* occupies a special place because of its emotional accessibility and spiritual significance. Written by Goswami Tulsidas in Awadhi, the forty-verse hymn praises Lord Hanuman as a symbol of strength, wisdom, courage, humility, and unwavering devotion to Lord Rama.

In modern India, mythological texts are no longer confined to ritual spaces alone. They are increasingly interpreted through psychological, sociological, philosophical, and literary perspectives. One of the most influential contemporary mythologists contributing to this interpretive tradition is Devdutt Pattanaik. Through his writings, lectures, and commentaries, Pattanaik seeks to make mythological narratives understandable and relevant to modern audiences. In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, he offers a reflective and interpretive reading of the traditional hymn, emphasizing symbolic meaning over literal religiosity.

Pattanaik argues that mythology should not be understood merely as a collection of supernatural stories. Instead, myths reveal how societies imagine truth, morality, and human relationships. He writes, “Myths are not lies. Myths are stories that reveal how cultures make sense of the world” (Pattanaik 11). This statement becomes central to understanding *My Hanuman Chalisa*. Rather than reducing Hanuman to a divine warrior figure, Pattanaik presents him as a symbolic representation of disciplined consciousness and ethical selfhood.

The tension between myth and modernity often emerges in debates surrounding rationality and faith. Modernity is frequently associated with scientific thinking, individualism, skepticism, and material progress, while myth is often dismissed as irrational or outdated. However, scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell argue that myths remain psychologically and culturally significant even in technologically advanced societies. Campbell observes that myths provide symbolic maps through which individuals understand existence and purpose (Campbell 7). Similarly, Eliade maintains that myths preserve sacred meanings that help societies negotiate existential anxieties (Eliade 21).

Within this framework, Pattanaik’s *My Hanuman Chalisa* becomes an attempt to reconcile mythic consciousness with modern sensibilities. The text addresses contemporary concerns such as stress, fear, insecurity, ego, ambition, loneliness, and ethical confusion. Hanuman emerges not merely as a deity to be worshipped but as a metaphorical guide for self-transformation.

This paper explores the relationship between myth and modernity in *My Hanuman Chalisa*. It examines how Pattanaik interprets Hanuman symbolically, how he adapts devotional literature for modern readers, and how mythology functions as a cultural and psychological resource in contemporary society.

DISCUSSION

Myth as Cultural Consciousness

Myth has always played an essential role in preserving cultural values and social memory. In Indian civilization, mythological narratives are deeply integrated into everyday life through festivals, rituals, oral storytelling, literature, and performing arts. Myths provide symbolic

frameworks through which communities understand morality, relationships, suffering, duty, and transcendence.

According to Joseph Campbell, myths are “public dreams” that express collective human experience (Campbell 18). They are not simply fictional stories but symbolic narratives that communicate existential truths. Similarly, Northrop Frye argues that myths form the structural foundation of literature and cultural imagination (Frye 136).

Pattanaik's approach to mythology reflects these theoretical perspectives. He repeatedly emphasizes that myths should not be evaluated solely on historical accuracy. Instead, their significance lies in the meanings societies attach to them. In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik interprets Hanuman as an archetype of disciplined energy and emotional intelligence. He writes, “Hanuman represents strength without arrogance and devotion without fear” (Pattanaik 29).

This interpretation transforms Hanuman into a universal symbol relevant beyond religious boundaries. The mythological character becomes a psychological model for ethical living in modern society. Through such reinterpretation, Pattanaik demonstrates that mythology remains culturally alive because it evolves alongside changing social realities.

Hanuman as a Symbol of Inner Strength

One of the central themes in *My Hanuman Chalisa* is the symbolic representation of Hanuman as inner strength. Traditional devotional interpretations celebrate Hanuman's physical power and heroic achievements. However, Pattanaik shifts emphasis toward emotional resilience and self-control. The original *Hanuman Chalisa* describes Hanuman as “Mahavir Vikram Bajrangi,” meaning the great hero with thunderbolt-like strength (Tulsidas 5). Pattanaik interprets this strength not merely as muscular force but as psychological discipline. He explains that true strength lies in mastering fear, ego, and insecurity. Modern life is characterized by competition, anxiety, and emotional instability. In such circumstances, Hanuman's unwavering focus becomes symbolically relevant. Pattanaik writes, “Hanuman succeeds because his mind is free from self-doubt and self-obsession” (Pattanaik 42). This interpretation aligns Hanuman with modern discussions surrounding mindfulness and emotional intelligence.

The symbolic power of Hanuman also lies in humility. Despite possessing immense abilities, Hanuman remains devoted to Rama. His identity is shaped not by domination but by service. Pattanaik observes, “Hanuman's greatness comes from surrendering his ego rather than magnifying it” (Pattanaik 47).

This symbolic reading challenges modern notions of success rooted in individualism and competition. Instead, Pattanaik proposes an ethical model based on compassion, humility, and collective well-being.

Myth and Psychological Interpretation

One of Pattanaik's major contributions lies in his psychological interpretation of mythology. Rather than treating myths as distant sacred narratives, he interprets them as reflections of human consciousness.

Carl Jung's theory of archetypes provides an important framework for understanding Pattanaik's approach. Jung argues that mythological figures symbolize recurring psychological patterns within the collective unconscious (Jung 63). Hanuman functions as one such archetype representing courage, devotion, discipline, and self-realization.

Pattanaik repeatedly connects Hanuman's journey with psychological growth. The episode of Hanuman forgetting his powers until reminded by Jambavan becomes symbolic of human potential hidden beneath fear and insecurity. Pattanaik writes, "Like Hanuman, human beings often forget their own strength until circumstances awaken their confidence" (Pattanaik 58).

This interpretation resonates strongly with modern readers facing emotional crises and identity struggles. Mythology thus becomes therapeutic rather than merely ritualistic. The *Hanuman Chalisa* evolves into a guide for self-discovery and emotional empowerment. Psychological interpretations also enable Pattanaik to connect mythology with contemporary mental health concerns. He presents devotion not as blind faith but as emotional anchoring. Hanuman's devotion to Rama symbolizes the human search for meaning and stability in a fragmented world.

Modernity and the Reinterpretation of Devotion

Modernity often encourages skepticism toward religious traditions. Scientific rationalism, secularism, and technological advancement have transformed how individuals engage with spirituality. Yet devotional practices continue to survive because they adapt to changing social contexts. Pattanaik's *My Hanuman Chalisa* reflects this adaptive process. He avoids rigid theological arguments and instead focuses on symbolic relevance. His language is accessible, conversational, and interpretive rather than doctrinal. The Bhakti tradition historically emphasized emotional devotion over ritual complexity. Scholars such as Karen Pechilis note that Bhakti democratized spirituality by prioritizing personal connection with the divine (Pechilis 14). Pattanaik extends this democratizing impulse into modernity by making mythology psychologically relatable. He explains that devotion is not submission born from weakness but alignment born from understanding. According to Pattanaik, "Bhakti is not escape from reality; it is a way of engaging with reality without fear" (Pattanaik 73).

This modern interpretation of devotion challenges stereotypes that associate religiosity with irrationality. Instead, devotion becomes a method for cultivating emotional balance and ethical awareness.

Symbolism in the *Hanuman Chalisa*

Symbolism forms the foundation of Pattanaik's interpretive method. Every episode associated with Hanuman is treated as metaphorically meaningful. Hanuman's leap across the ocean symbolizes the ability to transcend limitations. Pattanaik interprets the ocean as fear and uncertainty, while the leap represents courage generated through faith and discipline. He writes, "The ocean exists outside us and within us. Hanuman teaches us how to cross both" (Pattanaik 81).

Similarly, the burning of Lanka becomes symbolic of destroying ignorance and ego. Pattanaik explains that Hanuman's fire is not merely destructive; it is transformative. It purifies falsehood and restores moral order. The mountain-bearing episode also receives symbolic interpretation. Hanuman carrying the Sanjeevani mountain reflects the importance of decisive action during moments of crisis. Pattanaik notes, "Hanuman does not wait for perfect certainty. Compassion demands immediate action" (Pattanaik 92).

Such symbolic readings allow mythology to remain meaningful within modern ethical discussions. Mythological narratives become reflections on courage, empathy, responsibility, and resilience.

Mythology and Cultural Identity

In contemporary India, mythology continues to influence cultural identity despite rapid modernization. Mythological symbols appear in cinema, politics, advertising, digital media, and popular culture. Pattanaik's work reflects this continuing relevance of myth. By reinterpreting Hanuman for contemporary readers, he participates in preserving cultural continuity while encouraging intellectual engagement.

Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is not fixed but continuously reconstructed through representation and interpretation (Hall 225). Pattanaik's reinterpretation demonstrates this process of cultural reconstruction. He neither rejects tradition nor accepts it uncritically. Instead, he translates mythic narratives into modern cultural language.

Hanuman thus becomes a bridge between past and present. The figure retains devotional significance while simultaneously functioning as a modern ethical symbol. This dual function is especially important in an era of globalization where traditional identities often experience fragmentation. Pattanaik's work reassures readers that mythology can coexist with modernity without losing symbolic depth.

Ethical Dimensions of Hanuman

Ethics occupies a central place in Pattanaik's interpretation of Hanuman. Modern societies frequently confront moral ambiguity shaped by consumerism, competition, and social

alienation. In this context, Hanuman emerges as a model of ethical clarity. Hanuman's actions are guided not by personal ambition but by responsibility and compassion. Pattanaik writes, "Hanuman's power is ethical because it is used in the service of others" (Pattanaik 104).

This ethical orientation contrasts sharply with modern forms of success based on domination and self-interest. Hanuman symbolizes responsible strength rooted in humility. The ethical relevance of Hanuman also lies in his emotional maturity. Unlike many heroic figures driven by anger or pride, Hanuman remains composed and purposeful. Pattanaik emphasizes that emotional discipline forms the basis of true courage. This interpretation aligns mythology with modern ethical psychology. Hanuman becomes an example of balanced consciousness capable of integrating strength with compassion.

Language and Accessibility

Another important aspect of Pattanaik's work is linguistic accessibility. Traditional religious commentaries often employ highly Sanskritized language and theological terminology inaccessible to younger readers. Pattanaik adopts a simpler and more conversational style. His interpretations avoid dogmatism and encourage reflection. This accessibility allows mythology to reach audiences unfamiliar with classical religious scholarship. The democratization of mythological interpretation reflects broader changes in literary culture. Modern readers increasingly seek spiritual meaning outside rigid institutional structures. Pattanaik responds to this cultural shift by presenting mythology as intellectually engaging rather than exclusively ritualistic. Through accessible language, *My Hanuman Chalisa* becomes both educational and reflective. Readers are invited not only to worship Hanuman but also to understand the symbolic relevance of his character.

Mythology in a Technological Age

The survival of mythology in a technological age may appear paradoxical. Yet myths continue to thrive precisely because technological progress cannot eliminate existential anxieties. Modernity has generated unprecedented material advancement, but it has also intensified loneliness, stress, and identity crises. Pattanaik's reinterpretation of Hanuman addresses these psychological conditions. He explains that mythology survives because it speaks to emotional truths beyond scientific explanation. While science explains how the world functions, myths address why human beings seek meaning and connection. This distinction echoes Campbell's observation that myths help individuals navigate "the inward journey" of existence (Campbell 34). Pattanaik similarly positions Hanuman as a guide for internal transformation. The popularity of mythological reinterpretations in contemporary India demonstrates that modern readers continue to seek symbolic narratives capable of addressing emotional and ethical uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

Devdutt Pattanaik's *My Hanuman Chalisa* represents a significant contribution to contemporary mythological interpretation. By reimagining the *Hanuman Chalisa* through symbolic, psychological, and cultural perspectives, Pattanaik bridges the gap between myth and modernity. Rather than presenting mythology as obsolete superstition, he demonstrates its continuing relevance in contemporary life. Hanuman emerges not only as a devotional deity but also as a metaphor for courage, humility, discipline, compassion, and self-awareness.

Pattanaik's interpretive method reflects a broader cultural shift in which traditional narratives are being revisited through modern intellectual frameworks. His work illustrates that myths remain powerful because they evolve alongside human consciousness. The paper concludes that *My Hanuman Chalisa* succeeds in transforming devotional literature into a medium of ethical reflection and psychological self-discovery. Through accessible language and symbolic interpretation, Pattanaik ensures that Hanuman continues to inspire modern readers navigating the uncertainties of contemporary existence.

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