

# Devdutt Pattanaik and the Modern Retelling of Hindu Devotional Literature

*Dr. Shristy Verma*

*Assistant Professor, Faculty of Arts & Humanities, Kalinga Universities, Naya Raipur, C.G.*

## ABSTRACT

Contemporary Indian mythological writing has witnessed a remarkable transformation through the works of Devdutt Pattanaik, whose reinterpretations of Hindu myths and devotional traditions have contributed significantly to the modern understanding of Indian spirituality and culture. Pattanaik's writings bridge the gap between ancient religious narratives and contemporary intellectual discourse by presenting mythology as a living cultural and psychological system rather than merely a sacred tradition confined to ritual practice. This research paper examines how Pattanaik modernizes Hindu devotional literature through reinterpretation, symbolism, narrative accessibility, and cultural contextualization. Focusing particularly on *My Hanuman Chalisa*, the paper explores how Pattanaik transforms devotional texts into instruments of ethical reflection, self-discovery, and cultural dialogue. The study further investigates the relationship between mythology and modernity, the psychological dimensions of devotion, and the role of retelling in preserving cultural continuity. Drawing upon mythological studies, literary criticism, and cultural theory, this paper argues that Pattanaik's modern retellings contribute to the democratization of Hindu devotional literature by making it accessible to contemporary readers while preserving its symbolic depth and philosophical significance.

## Keywords

Devdutt Pattanaik, Hindu devotional literature, mythology, modern retelling, Hanuman Chalisa, symbolism, Bhakti tradition, mythology and modernity, self-discovery, Indian literature

## INTRODUCTION

Hindu devotional literature has historically occupied a central position in Indian cultural and spiritual life. Texts such as the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and devotional hymns like the *Hanuman Chalisa* have shaped ethical values, social imagination, and religious consciousness for centuries. These works transcend literary boundaries and function as cultural frameworks through which individuals understand morality, duty, devotion, and identity.

However, the rapid social and intellectual transformations of the modern world have created new challenges for the interpretation and reception of classical devotional texts.

In contemporary India, mythological narratives are no longer confined to temples, oral traditions, or ritualistic recitations. Instead, they circulate through literature, digital media, television, cinema, and modern publishing. Among the writers who have contributed significantly to this transformation is Devdutt Pattanaik, an Indian mythologist, author, and cultural commentator whose works reinterpret Hindu mythology for modern audiences. Pattanaik's writings combine mythology, psychology, philosophy, and contemporary social reflection, thereby creating a new mode of devotional interpretation.

In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik revisits the devotional hymn composed by Goswami Tulsidas and offers symbolic and philosophical interpretations of its verses. Rather than limiting the text to religious devotion alone, he presents the *Hanuman Chalisa* as a guide to emotional resilience, ethical awareness, and self-understanding. According to Pattanaik, mythology should not be viewed merely as fantasy or superstition but as "cultural truth expressed through symbols" (Pattanaik 12). This perspective enables contemporary readers to approach devotional literature not only as sacred scripture but also as psychological and ethical discourse.

The concept of retelling has become increasingly important in modern literary studies. Retellings reinterpret traditional narratives in order to make them meaningful for contemporary audiences while preserving their cultural essence. Linda Hutcheon explains that adaptation and retelling involve "repetition without replication" (Hutcheon 7). Pattanaik's work exemplifies this process because he preserves the spiritual significance of devotional literature while simultaneously transforming its interpretive framework.

This research paper examines the role of Devdutt Pattanaik in the modern retelling of Hindu devotional literature. It explores how his works reinterpret mythology for contemporary readers, how symbolism functions within his narratives, and how devotional texts become instruments of ethical and psychological reflection. Particular attention is given to *My Hanuman Chalisa* as a representative example of Pattanaik's interpretive methodology.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Mythology and the Contemporary World**

Mythology has traditionally served as a medium through which societies articulate moral principles, existential concerns, and cultural values. Myths explain the origins of the universe, the nature of humanity, and the relationship between individuals and the divine. Joseph Campbell argues that myths function as "public dreams" that provide symbolic meaning to human life (Campbell 18). In Indian civilization, mythology has historically shaped philosophical discourse, religious rituals, and social ethics.

However, the modern world often approaches mythology with skepticism. Rationalism, scientific thought, and secular education have transformed the ways in which myths are perceived. For many modern readers, mythological texts appear distant from contemporary realities. This intellectual gap has created a need for reinterpretation and contextualization.

Devdutt Pattanaik addresses this challenge by presenting mythology as a symbolic system rather than literal history. He explains that myths communicate emotional and philosophical truths that remain relevant regardless of historical change. In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik writes, "Myths are mirrors through which societies understand fear, faith, ambition, and compassion" (Pattanaik 21). This interpretation allows mythology to remain meaningful in the modern age.

Pattanaik's work differs from purely religious commentary because it integrates mythology with psychology and sociology. He interprets mythological characters not merely as divine beings but also as symbolic representations of human emotions and ethical dilemmas. Hanuman, for example, represents courage, humility, and disciplined devotion. Rama symbolizes ethical balance and moral responsibility. Ravana reflects ego and intellectual arrogance. Through these symbolic readings, mythology becomes relevant to contemporary psychological experiences.

Wendy Doniger observes that myths survive because they possess "the flexibility to generate new meanings in different historical contexts" (Doniger 11). Pattanaik's retellings demonstrate this flexibility by connecting traditional devotional narratives with contemporary concerns such as anxiety, identity, and emotional insecurity.

### **Retelling as Cultural Preservation**

Retelling plays an essential role in preserving cultural traditions. Oral storytelling traditions have historically depended upon reinterpretation and adaptation. Each generation reshapes myths according to its own social realities and intellectual concerns. In Indian literary culture, retellings of mythological texts have existed for centuries. The *Ramayana* itself has numerous regional and linguistic variations. A.K. Ramanujan famously observed that there are "many Ramayanas" rather than a single authoritative version (Ramanujan 24). This multiplicity reflects the dynamic nature of Indian mythological traditions.

Devdutt Pattanaik continues this tradition of reinterpretation. His writings do not seek to replace traditional devotional texts but to create new interpretive pathways for modern audiences. He simplifies complex mythological concepts while retaining symbolic richness. This accessibility has contributed to the popularity of his works among younger readers. In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Pattanaik transforms the devotional hymn into a reflective text that addresses emotional and ethical questions. He interprets Hanuman's devotion to Rama as a metaphor for disciplined selfhood. According to Pattanaik, "Hanuman's strength comes not

from aggression but from surrender to purpose” (Pattanaik 38). This interpretation connects spirituality with psychological resilience.

The modern retelling of devotional literature also involves linguistic accessibility. Classical religious texts often contain archaic language that may be difficult for contemporary readers to understand. Pattanaik’s prose style is simple, direct, and explanatory. This approach democratizes mythological knowledge and expands its readership. Karen Armstrong argues that myths must evolve with society because “when myths lose their relevance, they lose their power” (Armstrong 9). Pattanaik’s work revitalizes devotional literature by presenting it within contemporary cultural frameworks.

### **Symbolism in My *Hanuman Chalisa***

Symbolism occupies a central place in Pattanaik’s interpretation of devotional literature. Rather than reading the *Hanuman Chalisa* as a literal description of divine miracles, he interprets its imagery symbolically.

The traditional *Hanuman Chalisa* describes Hanuman as “the ocean of wisdom and virtue” (*gyan gun sagar*) (Tulsidas 4). Pattanaik interprets this phrase as an indication of intellectual humility combined with moral discipline. Wisdom, according to him, is inseparable from compassion.

Hanuman’s leap across the ocean becomes a metaphor for overcoming psychological fear and limitation. Pattanaik explains, “The ocean is not merely geographical; it represents the emotional distance created by doubt and insecurity” (Pattanaik 46). Through symbolic interpretation, mythological episodes acquire psychological significance.

Another important symbol is Hanuman’s burning of Lanka. Traditionally understood as an act of heroic power, Pattanaik interprets it as the destruction of ego and illusion. He writes, “Lanka symbolizes attachment to pride, and fire becomes the force of transformation” (Pattanaik 51).

Symbolic interpretation allows devotional literature to transcend ritualistic reading. Myths become reflective narratives that encourage introspection and ethical awareness. Mircea Eliade notes that symbols enable religious narratives to communicate “multiple layers of meaning simultaneously” (Eliade 33). Pattanaik’s work exemplifies this symbolic multiplicity.

### **Devotion and Self-Discovery**

One of the defining features of Pattanaik’s reinterpretation is the connection between devotion and self-discovery. Traditional devotional literature often emphasizes surrender to the divine. Pattanaik retains this spiritual dimension while also presenting devotion as a process of psychological transformation.

In the Bhakti tradition, devotion is not merely ritual worship but emotional intimacy with the divine. Karen Pechilis explains that Bhakti emphasizes “personal and emotional engagement with sacred presence” (Pechilis 14). Pattanaik expands this concept by interpreting devotion as self-awareness.

Hanuman’s unwavering devotion to Rama symbolizes the alignment of the self with ethical purpose. Pattanaik argues that Hanuman represents “the disciplined mind that discovers freedom through service” (Pattanaik 63). This interpretation resonates strongly with contemporary readers who seek emotional balance and meaning.

Modern society is often characterized by anxiety, competition, and psychological fragmentation. Pattanaik suggests that devotional literature can address these emotional conditions by providing symbolic frameworks for resilience. He writes, “Faith is not escape from fear; it is the courage to face fear without losing compassion” (Pattanaik 67).

This psychological interpretation reflects Carl Jung’s theory of archetypes. Jung argues that mythological figures represent universal patterns within the human psyche (Jung 58). Hanuman functions as an archetype of courage, loyalty, and disciplined strength.

### **Mythology, Ethics, and Contemporary Society**

Another important dimension of Pattanaik’s retelling is ethical reflection. Hindu devotional literature has historically functioned as a moral framework guiding social conduct and spiritual values. In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, ethical principles emerge through symbolic interpretation rather than direct moral instruction. Hanuman’s humility contrasts with Ravana’s arrogance. Service is valued over domination. Compassion becomes superior to violence.

Pattanaik emphasizes that myths are not rigid codes of conduct but interpretive narratives that encourage ethical reflection. He states, “Mythology does not provide commandments; it provides conversations about human behavior” (Pattanaik 75).

This approach differs significantly from dogmatic religious interpretation. Pattanaik encourages readers to engage critically with mythology and derive personal meaning from symbolic narratives. The ethical relevance of mythology remains significant in modern society. Contemporary social problems such as materialism, alienation, and intolerance often reflect deeper emotional and moral crises. Mythological narratives can provide symbolic frameworks through which individuals reconsider values such as humility, empathy, and responsibility.

Campbell argues that myths guide individuals toward “a more balanced understanding of human existence” (Campbell 42). Pattanaik’s reinterpretations continue this ethical function within contemporary culture.

## **Accessibility and Popular Reception**

One reason for Pattanaik's popularity is his ability to make mythology accessible without oversimplifying it. His writings combine storytelling with explanation, thereby appealing to both religious and secular readers. Modern readers often encounter mythology through fragmented media representations. Pattanaik provides contextual interpretation that helps readers understand symbolic and philosophical dimensions. His visual style, including illustrations and diagrams in many works, further enhances accessibility. By integrating mythology with modern communication methods, Pattanaik participates in the democratization of devotional literature. However, his reinterpretations have also generated criticism. Some traditional scholars argue that modern retellings risk reducing sacred texts to psychological metaphors. Others believe that reinterpretation may distort theological meanings. Nevertheless, the continuing popularity of Pattanaik's works suggests that contemporary readers seek interpretive approaches capable of bridging spirituality and modernity. His writings create dialogue rather than rigid doctrinal authority.

## **Myth and Modern Identity**

The relationship between mythology and identity is another important aspect of Pattanaik's writings. Mythological narratives shape collective memory and cultural belonging. In postcolonial India, mythology also functions as a source of cultural continuity.

Pattanaik's retellings contribute to cultural identity by reconnecting modern readers with traditional narratives. However, he avoids presenting mythology as static nationalism. Instead, he emphasizes interpretive plurality. He argues that myths evolve because societies evolve. This perspective aligns with contemporary cultural theory, which views identity as dynamic rather than fixed. Through reinterpretation, Pattanaik encourages readers to approach mythology as a living tradition capable of addressing contemporary ethical and emotional realities.

## **CONCLUSION**

Devdutt Pattanaik has emerged as one of the most influential contemporary interpreters of Hindu mythology and devotional literature. Through works such as *My Hanuman Chalisa*, he reimagines traditional devotional texts for modern audiences while preserving their symbolic and spiritual significance. Pattanaik's reinterpretations demonstrate that mythology remains relevant in contemporary society because it addresses universal human concerns such as fear, identity, devotion, courage, and ethical responsibility. By combining mythology with psychology, symbolism, and cultural commentary, he transforms devotional literature into a medium of self-discovery and reflective thought. His modern retellings also contribute to the preservation of cultural traditions by making mythological narratives accessible to younger and

more diverse audiences. Rather than treating mythology as rigid dogma, Pattanaik presents it as a dynamic interpretive system capable of generating new meanings.

In *My Hanuman Chalisa*, Hanuman emerges not merely as a divine hero but as a symbolic figure representing disciplined devotion, humility, emotional resilience, and ethical awareness. Through symbolic interpretation, Pattanaik bridges the gap between ancient spirituality and modern intellectual inquiry. Ultimately, Devdutt Pattanaik's contribution to the modern retelling of Hindu devotional literature lies in his ability to create dialogue between tradition and modernity. His works preserve cultural memory while encouraging contemporary readers to engage critically and personally with mythological narratives. In doing so, he ensures that devotional literature continues to remain intellectually meaningful and culturally relevant in the modern world.

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