

# The Retell Market

Every reading is an interpretation. So a Siberian court might right now be mulling over a request for a ban on the Gita, but the genre of retelling our epics and classics has never found greater and keener readership

Archana Khare Ghose | TNN

There are certain truths about the Bhagvad Gita that quite a few of us, including the puja-performing twice-born Hindus, don't even know yet. That this seminal scripture is a conversation between Lord Krishna and the warrior prince Arjuna just before the beginning of the Great War at Kurukshetra is only half the story. That it was in the middle of a Siberian storm recently is not even consequential. The most important modern truth about this ancient book is that it is not just equally relevant today but is also a bestseller. Well, almost, though with certain imaginative tweaks.

There has always been an interest in mythological stories in Indian languages but now there is a sudden spike in this interest in English, too. It may be because of growing sophistication of our readership

R Sivapriya | PENGUIN BOOKS

The Bhagvad Gita, which recently found itself in the middle of an intense debate in Russia regarding "extremist" content — leading to an equally angry reaction in the Indian Parliament on how anyone can even think of banning what has been seen as a fountain of wisdom and inspiration — actually lends itself rather well to varied modern interpretations. In fact, it has metamorphosed into a very popular, money-spinning genre.

The genre — where writers dip into the endless pit of stories and characters from our mythology and history and marry them off with modern situations — has, after all, made Amish Tripathi the second bestselling author today after Chetan Bhagat. His stories of Lord Shiva retold for our times — The Immortals of Meluha and Secret of the Nagas — have been runaway successes with the publisher, Westland, feeling evidently proud quoting the figure of 400,000 copies sold so far of the two books combined. Tripathi, who prefers to be known

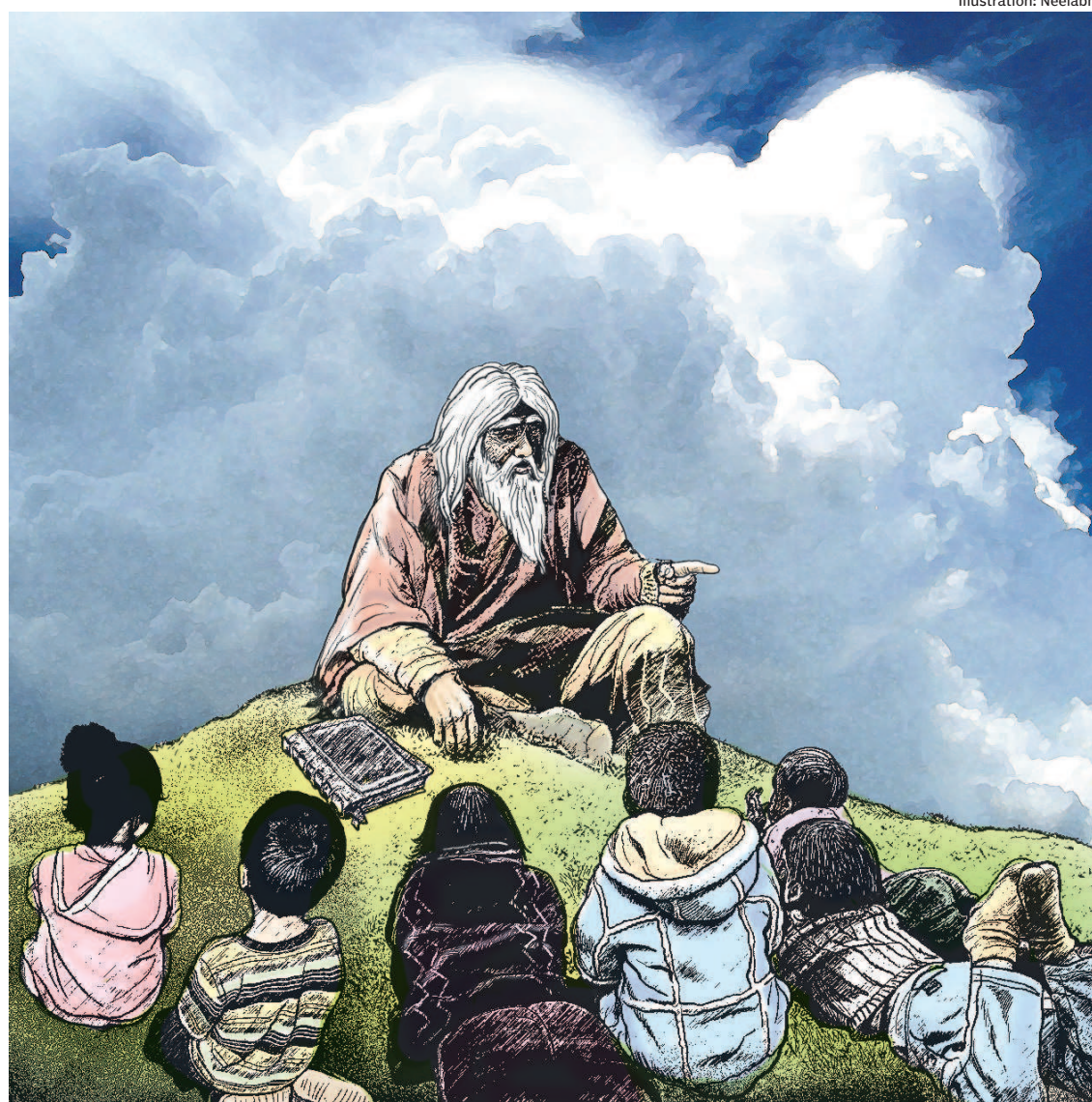


Illustration: Neelabh

as Amish on his book covers, is not the only one who is rushing into the big, dark cave where the previous generations of Indians had forgotten their own stories and moved on. And he is not the first either to have attempted it. So what explains this sudden mass fascination for Ram, Ravana, Krishna, Arjun, Duryodhana and even Chankya, Akbar and the Rani of Jhansi? Didn't the trendy folks of the '60s and '70s quietly brush aside their Amar Chitra Kathas from their English-speaking lives and felt hip in the company of Archies and Veronica instead?

Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO of

Westland (that had first refused to publish Amish, like every other Indian publisher, and then had to eat crow and buy the rights for his next book when The Immortals... hit top of the publishing charts), says it is a combination of various factors that has ensured the success of this genre. "The new generation of Indian readers is not just comfortable with its Indian roots but also willing to know more about it. And there is a wealth of material in our mythology and history which can become a bestseller in the hands of a gifted writer," reasons Padmanabhan. Westland has quite a few titles in this genre in its kitty, like the next big se-

ries by Ashok Banker, who pioneered this subset in Indian writing almost two decades ago. Banker's next, The Mahabharat series, is due to be published by Westland in 2012. Publishers, in fact, seem to be falling over each other to get these titles giving the elite writers in this category multiple publishing options for their books. While Banker's Ramayan series was published by Penguin, his 'Krishna series' is being released by HarperCollins. Devdutt Patnaik, who is generally referred to as a mythologist and has one of the most comprehensive titles in these categories, too, is published by multiple names in the

business.

R Sivapriya, the editor who handles this genre for Penguin India, says, "There has always been an interest in mythological/ historical stories in Indian languages but now there is a sudden spike in this interest in English, too. I can only speculate about the reasons, one of which is the growing sophistication of our readership. Earlier, while only literary fiction caught the fancy of English readers, they are now exploring other genres as well."

Fantasy fiction as a genre is one of the most unexplored in Indian writing and if good story tellers continue to pay it serious attention, there is no reason why there can't be more celeb young authors like Ashwin Sanghi and Amish. Sanghi's *Chanakya Chant*, published last year, has sold 1,00,000 copies so far and has opened the door for many more such out-of-the-box views on our luxuriant history.

Sanghi, who is on a sabbatical in Goa these days writing his next book, says that it was the machinations for seats of power during the formation of UPA II in 2009 that inspired Chankya's Chant. "The goings-on were so evocative of Chanakya the historical character that this story started brewing in my mind," he says. And if Chankya can be a hit, then why can't Akbar or some forgotten tale of the rich court lives of the Mughals, or may be the Cholas, or even those closer to us in time than the 3rd century BC architect of the Maurya empire? One of the best books ever written in this genre is *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor, a text that extrapolated the past and the present of the Mahabharata brilliantly.

But such attempts are not divorced from controversies either, as Jaishree Misra realised to her stupefaction with her book Rani, which was banned by the Uttar Pradesh government upon its release in 2007. It was accused of being disrespectful towards the iconic figure as it talks about the queen's romance with a British officer.

Given the stir roiling the publishing industry in the country, authors feel that readers can expect a great deal of activity on this front because the stories and characters from our history and mythology are too huge to be dismissed off in a few books. And controversies like the one in Russia might just bring some much needed attention to our old tales and epics.

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## 'People thought I was mad to write Ramayana'

Ashok Banker was the first Indian writer to explore the genre of re-telling/ re-interpreting the classics of our collective heritage for the English readership in this country. He speaks to Archana Khare Ghose on the market success of the style

What spurred you on to explore this theme?

I come from an Anglo-Indian Christian family, Bible-studying, church-going, choir-singing. My mother's brief marriage to a Hindu at the age of 17 was a disaster because of his family's refusal to accept her liberal Anglo, Christian outlook. My mother and grandmother raised me and gave me the freedom to choose what I wished to become. I chose to stay human. It meant constant distrust and abuse from people of all religions. The abuse my mother and I suffered drove me to study the literature of our subcontinent, to try to understand the roots of this fanaticism. Eventually, it became a lifetime ambition to retell the tales, myths, legends, itihasa of our culture in a voice that sought the essential love and humanitarianism in them. I call it the Epic India Library. It is projected at over 70 volumes.

Did you anticipate a mass market for these books then? Did you face any trouble finding a publisher?

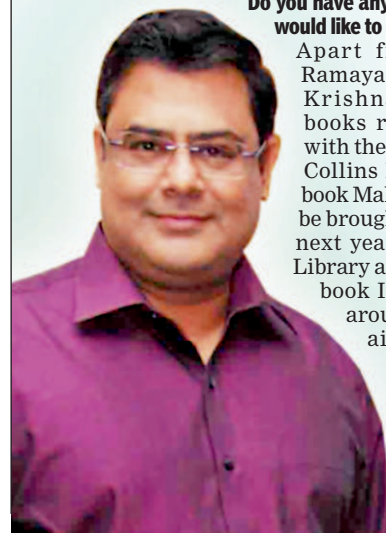
Nobody would even read it, forget publishing it. People thought I was insane for writing a Ramayana at the height of the Hindutva movement: they said that as a non-Hindu I was risking my life. Even the US and UK publishers who took it on later backed out fearing religious protests. But the worst were the high-caste Hindu literary types who call themselves Left-liberals but in fact are all Brahmins and resent any non-Hindu/non-Brahmin even touching their precious 'literature'. In the end, it was people that discovered and embraced my work. Today, 15 years later, 1.12 million copies sold in 56 countries and 12 languages worldwide, and not a single protest or lawsuit later, it seems incredible.

What makes your stories different from the originals to force a reader to pick up your copy?

My attempt with all these stories is to take them back from the clutches of religious gurus and reclaim them for readers everywhere. My approach is to use words to build worlds: to transport you back to that age, that time, put you into that jungle, that battlefield, that palace, and let you relive the story from within.

Do you have any more ideas that you would like to explore in this genre?

Apart from the 8-book Ramayana Series, 8-book Krishna Coriolis (two books released, the rest with the publisher HarperCollins India) and the 18-book Mahabharat Series (to be brought out by Westland next year), my Epic India Library also contains the 20-book Itihasa Series and around 24 other books aiming to collectively retell all the major myths, legends and itihasa of the Indian sub-continent.



Amish Tripathi

Myths are born. And they die. That is the way of the world. It seems that even the Gods can't prevent it. Thor has been banished from Scandinavia for long; Ra's sun has set permanently in Egypt, and Zeus is buried in the snow at Olympus. But the myths of Lord Ram still reign strong in India; Lord Krishna continues to entice, and the great Mahadev Shiva still dances in our hearts. Time stops even in these busy times if there is an Akhand Ramayan reading in an Indian house. And people all over our country continue to dissect the immeasurably deep characters of the Mahabharat. Why is that? Why have most other countries given up their ancient mythological heritage in their daily lives while India still continues to treasure its many millennia-old memories?

A lazy analysis would say that our myths are richer? Really? Our myths are delightful, no doubt about that. But so are the Greek myths of Zeus and his cohort from Olympus, magnificent in their breadth and profound in their meaning. So why did these powerful Gods retreat into anonymity? Why are they, for all practical purposes, dead?

I believe the real reason is that they lost their relevance to their followers. Why? Because the gods did not modernise in

## Myths don't die in India



pace with their devotees. The myths of the Olympian gods were relevant in the ancient age. But in the first millennium of the Common Era, as the influence of the Semitic religions grew, the stories of Zeus and his family remained unchanged. And the modernised Greeks stopped seeing their old gods as free-spirited and passionate but as decadent and debauched. They stopped loving and honouring their Olympian gods and, in effect, killed them.

Why did this not happen in India? I think it was due to our genius at modernising and lo-

calising our myths. Let's look at one of our most popular epics, the Ramayana. A television serial in the 1980s modernised Lord Ram's story to our age. It was based largely on the Ramcharitmanas written by Sant Tulsidas in the 16th century. But Tulsidas actually made significant changes from the original Valmiki Ramayan, thus modernising the tale to his time. The Kamba Ramayanam in the south localised it to the sensibilities of the Tamilians of the 12th century. There are possibly more than a thousand versions of the Ramayana

across Asia, where the core thoughts remained the same but the body around it was changed. The stories of our gods, therefore, have been constantly evolving, keeping the best of the old but adding in the attractiveness of the new, thus keeping our myths relevant and alive. And this is not just a Hindu trait; it's a habit of all religions practised in India. For example, Islam and Christianity are localised in India as well. It's not uncommon to walk into an Indian church and find the image of Mother Mary dressed as an Indian woman. Great Sufi saints propagated local Indian myths to preach the tenets of Islam.

In sum, the reason why our myths remain alive is that unlike in many other countries, religion and liberalism have not been historically at war in India. This means that religious people, by and large, have the open-mindedness to celebrate the modernisation and localisation of their ancient myths, which in turn, keeps those myths relevant to the modern age. Hence they remain alive. Therefore, counter intuitively, liberalism feeds religiosity and vice versa. But then, our great land, this beautiful country of India, has always been counter-intuitive!

Amish is the bestselling author of *The Immortals of Meluha* and *The Secret of the Nagas*

## How can you ban an idea?

Farida Khanum

According to some media reports, the public prosecutor of Tomsk, Russia, has filed a case in a local court seeking a ban on the Bhagvad Gita. As It Is, with commentaries by Swami Prabhupada. The prosecutor claims that the book is "extremist literature" and it may foster social discord and discrimination in the country.

This claim by the prosecutor is strange, to say the least. The fact is that the first Russian translation of the Gita was published in Russia way back in 1788. It means that the Gita in Russian has been available for more than 200 years. During this long period, there has been no report to suggest the book ever created any problem anywhere in Russian society. Moreover, the prosecutor has failed to refer to any new development that suggests the book could become a danger to Russia today.

Even cursory reading of the book by someone will show that the Gita is a book of wisdom. Mahatma Gandhi always used to say that the Gita was his intellectual mother; and that he had derived his ideology of peace from it. And Mahatma Gandhi not only made this claim, but also gave a demonstration of its truth by running Indian politics on the principles of peace and non-violence.

If some people disagree that the Gita is a book of peace, they have



LOST IN TRANSLATION: Iscon activists protest against the move to ban the Gita

every right to. But in an age of freedom, every publisher also has the right to take out the Gita in any language.

Then there is the question of an internationally-accepted principle — that all religious books are holy books and no court has the right to issue an order to ban them. It is beyond the jurisdiction of any court. I hope that the Russian court is aware of this fact and will dismiss the petition.

The Gita is an ancient book which Indians have been reading for a very long time, and it has never promoted intolerance in the country, so it is impossible to say that it's a book of intolerance. In fact, those who have asked for the banning of the Gita are the ones who are intolerant.

Demanding that 'this' or 'that' book should be banned is not a healthy

trend. Every book is a source of learning, and to promote learning and understanding, we should encourage the reading of the Gita rather than trying to banish it. Of course, it is naïve to believe that a ban can bring to an end to the circulation of any book. We all don't have to agree on everything. But we don't have the option to eliminate differences. What we can do is try to manage the differences.

I am a practicing Muslim, and in my personal library there are three editions of the Gita — in Urdu, Hindi and English. These do not pose any threat to me.

Khanum is associate professor at Jamia Millia Islamia's Department of Islamic studies and chairperson of Centre for Peace and Spirituality

Fairy tales can hide inside them grim deconstructions of the imperfect universe that is our life

Manoj Kewalramani

In popular perception, classic fairy tales represent an idyllic and unreal world. These stories are believed to offer childish and binary characterizations of good and evil that seemingly lack realism and moral relativism.

However, if one reads between the lines, there's a complex world captured in these stories. In fact, look beyond the colorful paraphernalia and you will see that they have little to do with childish musings about perfect love, magic and goodness.

Rather, they offer us a glimpse into human behaviour, predicated on our primal instincts, revealing the subtle games people play. That is the darkness which is woven into this beautiful tapestry. The tales of Snow White and Rumpelstiltskin illustrate this theory perfectly.

In Snow White, the beautiful and caring girl falls prey to the jealousy and arrogance of the Queen. Despite being banished to live in a forest with dwarfs, she doesn't find peace. The Queen's desire to eliminate her eventually results in Snow White eating the poisoned apple and dying, only to be revived by the Prince. There are two versions of the ending to this tale. The popular/sanitized one has Snow White marrying the Prince and the Queen rotting to death. The other, and perhaps the original, has the Queen attending Snow White's wedding. There she is identified as Snow White's tormenter and is punished to dance wearing shoes of burning iron. She does so, until her death.

While the take away from this could be simple and straightforward, i.e., jealousy is a horrible emotion and can cause one's demise, there's another side to all this. It's a story about the negative impact of passage of time, holding on to past glories and the parent-child conflict. Also, it's a tale about



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SANITIZED STORY: The original version of 'Snow White' ends on quite a gory note

power dynamics and how its changes tend to re-shape perspectives.

A similar theme, particularly regarding power-dynamics in relationships, is echoed in Rumpelstiltskin. A girl caught between her father's desire for relevance and a king's greed enters into a deal with an impish little creature. He would spin straw into gold for her, and she would reward him. The first reward is a necklace; the second, a ring; and the third, is the promise to handover her first-born child after she marries the king. A pretty standard agreement as per the laws of the 'land far, far way'.

So she agrees, and soon enough is married to the king, forgetting all about her deal. But when her child is born, Rumpelstiltskin returns to claim it. She denies, pleads and protests, and he offers her a chance. If she can guess his name, the deal was off. In the end, she manages to find out his name. And with that said, Rumpelstiltskin either kills himself or vanishes never to return.

Now here's a complex tale. There's clearly more than a contractual relationship between Rumpelstiltskin and the girl. There

is a certain emotional bond between them. He does, after all, agree to give her a chance to wriggle out of the deal. Wonder if the Pied Piper would have been that kind. In a sense, they seem to be two people trapped in an exaggerated sadomasochistic relationship, where the roles reverse depending on the circumstances. Most relationships contain an element of sadomasochism, but this tale is a gentle warning about how difficult such situations can be. Another interesting element comes to the fore towards the end. Rumpelstiltskin protects his name. He guards it with his life. That is symbolic of human frailties in relationships, and the conflict between the desire to be understood threadbare and the fear of being so consumed that one loses their individuality. Hence, the moment the name is revealed, Rumpelstiltskin feels unbearably vulnerable and violated, leading to his destruction.

CS Lewis once said that there would be a day when you would grow up to read fairy tales again. I'd second that. So go back to that closet of your childhood, pull out that dusty old book and give it another chance.

For all you know, you might just discover that while real life is no fairy tale at all, fairy tales are all about real life.

Kewalramani is the author of 'Fairy Tales: Love, Hate and Hubris', a poetic exploration of the dark in classic fairy tales