

# DEVDUTT PATTANAİK TALKS MYTH, MYTHOLOGY & MISOGYNY IN OUR EPICS ON THE RED SOFA. ONLY ₹2 WAS THERE

**D**evdutt Pattanaik, the prolific writer of mythology titles like *Myth = Mithya*, *The Pregnant King*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabharata* and the recent bestseller *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana* [Penguin, Rs 499], chatted with PR consultant **Rita Bhimani** for the Red Sofa Conversations at The Conclave. Excerpts from Pattanaik's retelling of the two Indian epics...

## THE BEGINNING

Well, my interest in the epics started after my medical days. I was not sure... I knew I wanted to practise medicine, which is why I went to the pharmaceutical industry. You need to pay your bills, right?

But I would energise myself by reading mythology. I would buy a lot of books and I would notice there was one set meant for children and another set meant for serious academicians. There was nothing in between. The second thing I noticed was that when I would read *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, I would see patterns, lots of patterns... and I thought how come nobody is commenting on it?

The third thing I noticed was that most writings on Indian mythology came from the West and Indians would only react by condemning them or criticising them but not giving them a point of view.

So I started writing some very small columns here and there, which got very popular. I was not a good writer but my editors still encouraged me, saying my ideas were very thought-provoking. That led to my writing a book on Shiva, and then one after the other.

## GOOD VS EVIL

Do you see what the scriptures are doing? They are trying to provoke. The assumption they are challenging is that rules are good. On one level you have Ram who is a rule follower, *maryada purushottam* Ram. And on the other side, you have *leela purushottam* Krishna, he who bends and breaks the rules. Who is better?

But the scriptures are trying to communicate something that is far more profound. They are also



Devdutt Pattanaik and Rita Bhimani at The Conclave. Picture: Rashbehari Das

**DO YOU SEE WHAT THE SCRIPTURES ARE DOING? THEY ARE TRYING TO PROVOKE. THE ASSUMPTION THEY ARE CHALLENGING IS THAT RULES ARE GOOD. ON ONE LEVEL, YOU HAVE RAM WHO IS A RULE FOLLOWER. AND ON THE OTHER SIDE, YOU HAVE KRISHNA, HE WHO BENDS AND BREAKS THE RULES. WHO IS BETTER?... IT'S NOT THE RULES THAT MAKE YOU GOOD OR BAD. IT IS YOUR INTENT — DEVDUTT PATTANAİK**

creating a villain who breaks the rules and a villain who follows the rules. So you have a villain called Ravan who breaks the rules, he doesn't respect the boundaries of marriage, and then you have Duryodhan, who never breaks the rules, but you know he's the villain.

This is Indian scripture presenting us with a problem, saying it's not the rules that make you good or bad. It is your intent. The problem with intent is you can't see it. That *nirgun* is what these books are all about.

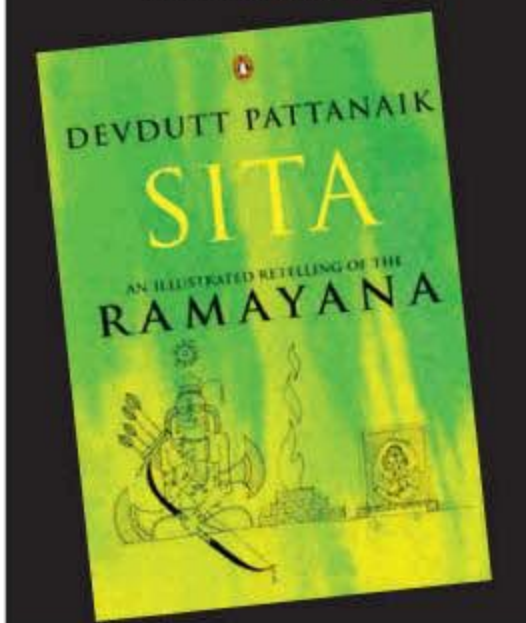
## SITA THE WISE

I used to read *Geet Ramayana*. *Geet Ramayana* is a series of Marathi songs written in the 1940s. There when Ram is going to the forest, the song talks about how not to blame people for your problems, about being large-hearted. Ram comes across as a hero. But when Sita is going to the forest, the same poet makes her a crybaby. She's whining and miserable and I found it very depressing. Because I thought you are basically saying that Ram is wise but she is not. Why is wisdom not given to the woman?

Yes, it's heart-breaking to be abandoned but you don't have to become a victim. And I saw that in narratives where femininity is presented, the word is "victim"....

There's also a line which says

**ON RAM AND SITA: THE KING IS CRUEL, THE HUSBAND IS NOT. IT'S A CONFLICT BETWEEN THE HUSBAND AND THE KING, AND THE HUSBAND LOSES AND THE KING WINS. THE KING ABANDONS THE QUEEN, THE HUSBAND DOESN'T ABANDON THE WIFE. HOW DO YOU KNOW THIS? WHAT IS THE EVIDENCE? HE DOES NOT REMARRY**



Ram is a king, he's talking of PR [public relations]. But what if Sita was impure? Is it okay to abandon her then? Is it okay to abandon someone because they are impure? That's the question.

Luv and Kush are saying these lines: "You abandoned Sita? Why? Did she not survive the fire and prove her chastity?"

This is Ram's answer: "Infidelity is never a reason to abandon anyone. Unwittingly she has become a stain on the royal reputation. A reason for people to mock the king. She had to be washed away."

It's the cruel language of a king. The king is cruel, the husband is not. It's a conflict between the husband and the king and the husband loses. The king abandons the queen, the husband doesn't abandon the wife. How do you know this? What is the evidence? He does not remarry.

Why would India worship a man who abandons his wife? I don't think our ancestors were idiots. They know the story and they are saying worship him. Now there are two possibilities — they are idiots, they are worshipping a wife-abandoning man or they are wise and trying to

communicate a very subtle idea through the extremely distasteful narrative....

Power is not when you kill people. You can kill a demon with 10 heads, I can kill a demon with hundred heads. But that's not strength. Strength is allowing you to be unfair. That's what Sita does. She is saying, "I cannot be abandoned."

She knows he will never remarry. They know each other well. But she also knows this is a husband who will abandon her. It's a tough book. While *Jaya* has width, this has depth. The *Ramayana* has depth.

In these lines you can see it (reads out from *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of The Ramayana*) — "That is when Sita knew Ram's worst fears have come true. The people had gossiped. They had mocked its king and queen." Which means she knows, she's not a silly girl. She is a wise wife who knows PR.

## THE WIFE OF FIVE

With Draupadi, the way the story begins is, she is born to destroy. She is not born out of love. She is born because her father wants to destroy the Kuru *vansa*. She has no mother, she has no childhood. She's born with this fiery body. And then at the *swayamvar*, when a charioteer participates, she says, 'I will not marry a charioteer.' She mocks a man for his caste. She marries a man who she thinks at the moment is a Brahmin. He turns out to be a liar, is actually a Kshatriya, and shares her with his brothers.

And then you have Draupadi suddenly having five husbands and demanding that half the property come to her, on which the husbands build a city. With this city she is mocking Duryodhan, a boy who has grown up with a father who cannot see and a mother who refuses to see. She refuses to remove her blindfold because of some *pratigya*. That's very stubborn and, in a way, cruel. And Draupadi mocks Duryodhan by saying, 'blind of the blind parents'. That's hurting someone in the sorest nerve possible. All this is building up to a frenzy.

On one level you have married men who will never take care of you, on another level you are provoking a person who is like a mad sociopath and you are trapped between these two. That's Draupadi, not realising what she has done. And then

suddenly, Krishna comes. It's a very interesting narrative, it's not like a man coming to save a woman. That would be a very simplistic narrative.

## THE JAMUN TREE

In Maharashtra folk narratives, there's a story, *Jamun Aakhyan*. The story says that once Draupadi plucks a *jamun* fruit by mistake and Krishna comes and says, 'Oh my god, you've plucked this fruit! A sage who was sitting under the tree has been fasting for 14 years and he'll open his eyes and want to eat that particular fruit. Now that the fruit has been plucked it is contaminated. So he will get angry and curse you.'

She asks him, 'What should I do?' Krishna says, 'If you tell a truth each, the fruit will go and join the tree.' So everyone tells one truth but Draupadi says, 'I have no secrets.' But the fruit doesn't join the tree. Finally she says, 'I have five but I desire six' and the fruit goes and joins the tree.

What is interesting is the dialogue after that. You can imagine it is a folk narrative, performed in villages. So the storyteller concludes, 'Do you know why the *jamun* fruit has that colour? Because if it stains our mouth after we eat it, it means we have secrets in our hearts. So if it stains you, don't dare judge Draupadi.'

Far more sophisticated than our Supreme Court!

## IMPORTANCE OF CHASTITY

There are two things that are celebrated in Indian society — the celibacy of men and the chastity of women. They don't talk about the celibacy of women or the chastity of men. Clearly these books were written by monks. You know if a *devadasi* would have written it, it would have been very different.

And there are *devadasi* versions of Krishna's stories which are dramatically different and not very popular in literature. Have you heard of the one written by a courtesan? She wrote a book called *Radhika Santwanam*. Now remember, Radha's stories come to us from folk traditions. There's Vidyapati and Chandidas writing about her in the north, which is popular. But when a courtesan writes about her, we don't know about it.

She writes the story of Radha as the older woman, Krishna is younger. The whole story is erotic literature where she prepares a younger bride called Ira for Krishna and she trains both of them on how to make love. And after that she goes into this great sorrow because now that the younger wife has come, why would Krishna remember her? So Krishna comes and tells her that at the end of the day, only she matters. And that is how she discovers true love.

There is sexuality that is deeply immersed in a text and yet it is *bhakti*. That's India. But we choose to see some parts of it because the diction of our tradition is just mindboggling and frightening. Even Krishna says that I can't handle this. The forest is scary because it is uncontrolled, untamed and unpredictable. So when I go back home, I want predictability. So I need chastity from my wife.

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