

**INTERACTION
BETWEEN INDIAN MYTHOLOGY
AND RELEVANT SOCIO-CULTURAL
CHALLENGES IN MODERN SOCIETY**

Devdutt Pattanaik is a prominent contemporary Indian writer and mythologist. His works offer fresh interpretations of ancient myths, deftly situating them within modern contexts. D. Pattanaik's insights extend beyond the realms of mythology, as he advocates for the integration of religious wisdom into various spheres such as business, leadership, management, and education, resonating deeply within Indian society of the 21st century. In this article, we will analyze his article *“Is Hinduism feminist or patriarchal?”* [4].

At the beginning of the article, the mythologist claims: *“Hinduism is patriarchal like most other religions. However, it is also feminist, unlike most other religions.”* The mythologist delineates two forms of feminism: ‘equality feminism’ and ‘liberation feminism.’ However, it is worth noting that feminism encompasses a wide range of movements and groups. Moreover, D. Pattanaik's characterization of ‘equality feminism’ and ‘liberation feminism’ lacks clarity.

D. Pattanaik notes that *“equality as an ideology has its roots in Christian mythology that rejected the notion of social hierarchy and saw all men (not women) as equal in the eyes of god.”* It is unclear what kind of mythology he talks about since it is absent in Christianity. The mythologist also turns to Islam, stating that the equality there can be observed in the fact that *“all men who visit Mecca are expected to dress in the same uniform, despite belonging to diverse economic, political, national, racial and ethnic groups.”*

Additionally, the expert mentions that *“many Muslim women insist that the Quran for its time gives women unprecedented agency and rights, though social practice of Islam, led by conservative male maulvis, tends to be patriarchal.”* It is important to underscore that while the Quran does grant women the right to inheritance, their entitlements to property are limited in comparison to their male relatives.

Reflecting on feminism and equality, the mythologist offers the perspective that *“Indra has to treat Durga as equal to Shiva or Vishnu if she kills an asura for him.”* Then, he adds: *“But that does not mean Durga is equal to Shiva, or Shiva is equal to Vishnu. Each one has their unique personality and need.”*

We aspire to contribute several insights to this discourse. Even though Hinduism teaches that every living entity is a fragment of Brahman, possessing Atman, each creature (including humans) is unique and differs from another in external characteristics, skills, and knowledge. What insights can be gleaned regarding the gods? Would their existence hold any significance if they were to possess identical thoughts and actions? The semblance among deities can only be discussed if a singular god has various names across different regions. However, when considering a singular source, each deity has distinct qualities, and fulfills specific missions, and the narratives surrounding them hold special significance.

Revisiting the idea of equality, D. Pattanaik claims: *“In Hinduism, all creatures*

are equal in the sense that all of them are containers of aatma. However, all creatures are diverse as the aatma occupies different bodies. Aatma is dehi, resident of the body, deha. Everyone's dehi is the same but our deha is different."

The mythologist's assertion, regarding the fact that the presence of Atman in every being makes them equal, is accurate. We would like to note that, according to Hinduism, all beings are equal for the reason that they are part of Paramatman (Brahman).

However, dehi is not synonymous with Atman, but rather denotes the subtle body enveloped within the physical form; the embodied soul [1], also referred to as jiva or the individual soul [2]. While the term 'dehi' finds mention in the Bhagavad Gita, its usage in other contexts is extremely rare and does not feature prominently in dictionaries. It would be more logical if D. Pattanaik employed the term 'jiva' in this context. Nevertheless, neither dehi nor jiva equates to Atman, since Atman is not a soul, but an antimaterial point of Paramatman. Furthermore, dehis (jivas) cannot be the same, as each living being possesses its unique karma to be accumulated and resolved, its own desires, which lead to certain actions, and its own way of thinking.

Furthermore, the expert underscores even though the Manusmriti claims that "*a woman is subservient to men: to her father, brother and son,*" mythology presents a wide range of examples where women made independent decisions, ignoring the opinions of others. As examples, the mythologist cites the independent selection of spouses by Sati and Parvati, Sita's insistence on accompanying Rama into exile, etc.

The evolution of the feminist element in 'new Indian mythmaking' is also evident in books of authors such as Amish Tripathi and Kavita Kané. In the book '*Sita: Warrior of Mithila*' by A. Tripathi [5], the author delves into the character of Sita, who traditionally embodies the archetype of the ideal, loyal, and obedient Indian wife. However, A. Tripathi presents a new interpretation of Sita, portraying her as a princess involved in conflicts and skilled in the art of combat. In the novel '*Lanka's Princess*,' [3] K. Kané narrates the tale of Surpanakha, the sister of the demon king Ravana. Unlike in Valmiki's '*Ramayana*', the character of Surpanakha, also referred to as Meenakshi takes center stage in K. Kané's book. The books of these writers require dedicated scholarly exploration.

References

1. Occurrences of dehi. Bhagavad Gita. Commentary by Swami Mukundananda. URL: <https://www.holy-bhagavad-gita.org/w/dehi> (accessed 14.03.2024).
2. Dehi. Glossary of Sanskrit Terms by Swami Krishnananda. URL: https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/glossary/glossary_degh.html (accessed 14.03.2024).
3. Kané K. Lanka's Princess. Rupa Publications Private Limited, 2014. URL: <https://a.co/d/2cV8Gf3> (accessed 14.03.2024).
4. Pattanaik D. Is Hinduism feminist or patriarchal? URL: <https://devdutt.com/is-hinduism-feminist-or-patriarchal/> (accessed 14.03.2024).
5. Tripathi A. Sita: Warrior of Mithila. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2022. URL: <https://a.co/d/07bUmX9> (accessed 14.03.2024).