

The Reimagining of Hindu Mythology: A study of Naga Myth in 'The Secret of the Nagas'

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Abstract:

This paper explores Amish Tripathi's novel *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), which reinterprets the Hindu myth of the Nagas. As the second book in Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, it blends elements of modern fantasy with insights from the ancient text *Shivapurana*, using mythology to address contemporary issues. In this installment, the protagonist, Shiva, embarks on a crucial journey to uncover the reality of the Nagas. In Hindu mythology, Nagas are traditionally depicted as serpents. However, in Tripathi's narrative, they represent individuals with physical deformities who are deemed inauspicious by the inhabitants of the Sapt-Sindhu region. As a result, they face social exclusion and are compelled to live along the banks of the Narmada River, with Panchavati serving as the capital of their territory, Nagaland. Through the *Shiva Trilogy*, Tripathi examines the deep-rooted beliefs of the Hindu community, highlighting their intricate connections with the societal laws and norms of that era.

Key words: Reimagining, Hindu Mythology, Naga myth, Panchavati.

Introduction

The term *Hindu* originates from *Sindhu*, referring to the region surrounding the Indus River, as recorded by foreign travelers. Over time, the customs and beliefs of the people in this land came to be collectively known as Hindu, a classification that became more prominent during British rule. In modern India, various religious traditions, including Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Jainism, and other indigenous faiths, are often grouped under the broader category of Hinduism a classification formalized during British governance. As a result, British scholars categorized texts such as the Brahmanical Vedas and Upanishads as Hindu scriptures.

Today, individuals who identify as Hindus in India often draw inspiration from mythological narratives found in revered texts like the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and *Puranas*. Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, which includes *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011), and *The Oath of Vayuputras* (2013), offers a reimagining of the mythological tales from the *Shivapurana*. This series has not only achieved widespread popularity in India but has also gained international recognition.

The Secret of the Nagas continues the narrative established in *The Immortals of Meluha*. The story follows Shiva, the brave warrior and leader of the Guna tribe, who seeks refuge in Meluha to escape the dangers posed by the Pakrati clan. During their time in seclusion, Shiva and his companions consume Somras with the help of Ayurvati, resulting in a remarkable transformation—Shiva's throat turns blue. This extraordinary change leads the Meluhans to recognize him as the Neelkanth, a figure prophesized in their ancient legends. However, Shiva initially struggles with the immense responsibility that comes with this identity, particularly the expectation that he must eradicate evil.

In Hindu mythology, three principal deities are revered: Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the preserver; and Shiva, the destroyer. In the *Shiva Trilogy*, Shiva aligns himself with the Meluhan society in their battle against evil. The Meluhan emperor, Daksha, perceives the Chandravanshis of Swadeep as the embodiment of this evil, primarily due to their starkly different way of life compared to the Suryavanshi Meluhans. Meluha faces ongoing threats from Naga terrorists, who have caused significant destruction, including an attack that devastated the core of Mount Mandar. This mountain plays a vital role in the production of Somras, a substance that grants prolonged youth and vitality to its consumers. As a result, the Meluhans enjoy extended lifespans and enhanced physical and mental well-being.

During the attack, Shiva's close friend Brahaspati, the chief scientist of Meluha, lost his life. Driven by a desire for vengeance, Shiva initially sets out to destroy the Chandravanshis, whom he perceives as the source of evil. However, after the battle with Swadeep, he comes to realize that their way of life is simply different rather than inherently malevolent. This revelation leads him to shift his focus toward uncovering the true threat to Meluha's ideal society the Nagas. The epic narrative of *The Immortals of Meluha* reaches its turning point in this significant journey.

The Secret of the Nagas follows Shiva as he embarks on a quest to unravel the mystery behind Brahaspati's murder. His journey takes him to Kashi and Branga, where he uncovers that the assassin originates from Nagaland and is referred to as the Lord of the People. This enigmatic figure is identified only by the Om symbol, which he inadvertently left behind

his Om bracelet was found at Mount Mandar. Through an encounter with Parasuram, Shiva gains a deeper understanding of the Nagas, realizing that they are not the villains they are believed to be, but rather the true victims of society's injustices.

In modern times, the term *Naga* holds significant relevance within the Indian context. The Nagas are the indigenous people of a hilly region in northeastern India, bordered by Arunachal Pradesh to the north, Assam to the west, Manipur to the south, and Myanmar to the east. The inhabitants of Nagaland are collectively referred to as *Nagas*. Although the various Naga tribes possess distinct languages, cultures, and ethnic identities, they share a common historical background and interconnected socio-economic, cultural, and political aspirations.

The origin of the term *Naga* remains uncertain, though it was the British who ultimately designated the indigenous communities living between British India and British Burma as *Nagas*. Johnston suggests that the term may have originated from the Assamese word *Noga*, meaning *naked*. Meanwhile, Hutton and Mills propose that it could be derived from *Nog*, a word signifying a mountain or an inaccessible place.

In another context, *Naga* refers to snakes, which have long been viewed with suspicion, often associated with trickery, slipperiness, and even danger. This perception has persisted for centuries, as serpents frequently symbolize deceit, betrayal, and death in ancient narratives. A notable example is found in the Christian story of Adam and Eve, where the Devil appears in the form of a serpent, tempting Eve to eat the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge.

The Greek myth of Medusa portrays her serpent hair in a negative light, associating it with evil. In contrast, Hindu mythology presents a more nuanced perspective, viewing snakes as nature spirits that embody both positive and negative aspects. They symbolize various themes, including fertility, death, protection, and vengeance. Interestingly, in many Hindu tales, snakes are depicted as more beneficial than harmful. As a result, Hindu teachings advocate for respecting snakes and discourage harming them, as doing so is believed to bring good fortune and prosperity (Katie Nikas 33).

In Hindu mythology, snakes, or *Nagas*, hold significant meaning, with references dating back to around 7200 BC. One interpretation connects them to fertility and rebirth, as the process of shedding their skin serves as a powerful symbol of renewal and transformation. This act represents the idea of letting go of the past and embracing new beginnings. However, snakes are also associated with negative connotations, such as death (Katie Nikas 33).

Ophiolatriy, or serpent worship, is one of the oldest known spiritual practices, spanning a vast geographical region. In Hindu culture, this practice is believed to have originated in the Ancient Indus Valley Civilization. Many scholars suggest that serpent worship was a fundamental aspect of the indigenous culture that existed before the Indo-Aryan migration and the rise of Vedic literature. This theory is supported by archaeological findings from sites such as Mohenjo-Daro, Harappa, and Lothal, where seals and terracotta artifacts depict serpents in various artistic forms (Hartel 664-6; Kaul 20). The origin of the term *Naga* underscores the non-Aryan roots of ophiolatriy in the region. Unlike the Sanskrit word *Sarpa*, which is linked to the Latin *Serpens*, meaning "crawling or creeping creature," *Naga* does not originate from Indo-European languages. This suggests that the term was borrowed from the indigenous language of the local people (Maury 167-9). In Hindu mythology, Lord Shiva is often depicted with a snake coiled around his neck, symbolizing protection. The serpent is wrapped three times, representing the past, present, and future (Walker 78). Both Buddha and Shiva hold significant places in Hindu tradition, and their association with the snake indicates that Nagas are not inherently malevolent beings.

During a period of great upheaval, a fierce battle erupted between the demons, known as Asuras, and the gods, referred to as Devas. Overwhelmed by the might of the Asuras, the gods turned to Lord Brahma, the creator, for guidance. He advised them to churn the ocean a task of immense magnitude. This endeavor ultimately led to the discovery of the nectar of immortality and a powerful source of strength, enabling the gods to prevail over the demons.

To accomplish the monumental task of churning the vast ocean, the gods sought the assistance of the demons. The mighty serpent king, Vasuki, was chosen to serve as the churning rope, with a nearby mountain acting as the central pivot. Lord Vishnu assumed the form of a tortoise to provide a stable foundation for this great endeavor. The gods grasped Vasuki's tail, while the demons held onto his head, and together, they began the strenuous process of churning.

As they continued, a variety of remarkable substances emerged from the ocean, including poison, agricultural elements, various animals, and ultimately, the much-coveted nectar of immortality. Since Vasuki played a crucial role in securing the nectar, the Devas expressed their gratitude to him. However, the poison released during the churning posed a great threat to the world. To protect all beings, Lord Shiva consumed the poison, but it began to affect him. To mitigate its impact, Vasuki, the great serpent, wrapped himself around Shiva's neck, helping to contain the poison. In Amish Tripathi's retelling, however, the nectar is not obtained through ocean churning but is instead manufactured at Mount Mandar by scientists. Additionally, Shiva's throat turns blue not due to drinking poison, but because he consumed the nectar for the first time. M.H. Abrahams' *Literary forms and Terms* states about myth through "The French structuralist Claud Levi-strauss departed from the traditional views just described to treat the myths within each culture as signifying systems whose true meanings are unknown to their proponents." (232)

This tale serves as yet another testament to the positive traits attributed to snakes in Hindu tradition. In contemporary Hinduism, snakes are celebrated as symbols of fertility, with various regions hosting festivals in their honor. One such

festival is “Nagapanchami,” which features vibrant performances by snake charmers, dancers, musicians, and other artists. (Katie Nikas, 33)

In Hindu mythology, the Nagas are a race of serpentine beings, born from the union of Kasyapa Prajapati and his wife Kadru. Many of these serpents possessed divine powers and maintained a complex relationship with the gods, often remaining neutral. Their immense strength made them a source of fear among humans. Notable Nagas include Vasuki, Kaliya, and Takshaka, and in some classifications, they were regarded as minor deities or Devas (George M. Williams, 2003, p. 217). An analysis of the term *Naga* and its associated mythology in Hinduism reveals that it is not inherently negative. However, in many cultures, snakes are often perceived in a negative light. In Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva Trilogy*, Shiva initially perceives the Nagas as evil, influenced by Nandi’s statement. However, as his journey unfolds, he discovers that the Nagas are actually an oppressed group within society. This paper explores how Shiva’s perspective on the Nagas evolves throughout the second book, forming the central theme of reimagining the Naga myth.

Literature Review:

Numerous researchers have examined various aspects of Amish Tripathi’s *Shiva Trilogy*, and their insights have significantly influenced the direction of this paper. In their research paper, *Amish Tripathi’s Contribution to Culture, Mythology, and Civilization through His Novels in The Immortals of Meluha* (2024), Deepak Kumar and Ravinder Kumar argue that Tripathi’s novels not only revive interest in Indian mythology but also provide a fresh perspective on cultural identity, spirituality, and the human experience. Similarly, Saroj Bala’s article, *Contemporization of the Shiva Myth: Reading the Shiva Trilogy by Amish Tripathi* (2024), explores power dynamics and the struggles of subaltern communities within Naga territory. It highlights how the colonial authority of Meluha exploits nature for its own greed, resulting in environmental destruction and the contamination of Somaras, which negatively impacts the Nagas. The general population holds disdain for the Nagas, attributing their suffering to a curse from past lives, ultimately leading to their exclusion from Sapt-Sindhu.

B. Chandana et al.’s article, *Indian Myth as a Mirror of the Local Context: An Analytical Study of Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy* (2023), examines Shiva’s journey as he embarks on a mission to confront the Nagas, initially perceived as monstrous beings responsible for violence. However, as Shiva delves deeper into the mysteries surrounding them, he discovers unexpected truths about his own destiny and the true nature of evil. Throughout this journey, he faces numerous conflicts and personal sacrifices while striving to protect those he holds dear. The *Shiva Trilogy* integrates both semi-mythical and rational interpretations of significant mythological elements, including Shiva’s blue throat, Sati’s fiery end, Ganesha’s elephant head, and references from the *Manu Smriti*, blending classical narratives with innovative reimaginings.

In *The Kolkata Statesman*, researcher Mrityunjay Khurana observed that “Amish has skillfully exploited Upanishadic, Puranic, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist legendary imagery, presenting their essence in straightforward and contemporary language” (387). Pooja Rani and Neha, in their article *Modernizing Myth: A Critical Analysis of Amish Tripathi’s Shiva Trilogy* (2023), examine how mythical stories can be adapted to modern times, drawing comparisons with the works of writers like Devdutt Pattanaik and Ashok Banker. Meanwhile, the study by Divyadharshini et al., titled *Reimagining Ethical Crossroads: Examining Moral Dilemma in Shiva Trilogy* (2023), emphasizes the importance of Shiva’s quest to battle evil as a key characteristic of effective leadership, carefully analyzing the moral dilemmas presented in the series. S. Karthik and Dr. Sangeeta Mukherjee’s research article, *The Dynamic Play of Power in Ostracism of Nagas and Parashuram in Amish Tripathi’s The Secret of the Nagas* (2020), applies Marxist theory to explore class exploitation, focusing on how characters like Parashuram and the Nagas are affected by the oppressive power structures within the novel. The study delves into the emotional, social, and psychological struggles of marginalized and alienated individuals such as Parashuram and the Nagas. The authors note that contemporary writers are reinterpreting Indian mythology by incorporating diverse themes into their narratives. Inspired by this perspective, I have chosen to explore the reimagining of the Naga myth in Tripathi’s *The Secret of the Nagas*.

Methodology:

A qualitative close-reading approach was employed to explore the reimagining of Hindu mythology in *The Secret of the Nagas*. The life of the Nagas and the principles of harmonizing with nature are examined for insights into the themes present in Shiva’s journey.

Results & Discussion:

In Amish Tripathi’s narrative, the Nagas are depicted as individuals with physical deformities, often regarded as cursed. They live along the Narmada River, within the Dandaka forest, and Panchavati is the capital of their realm. The Narmada, a sacred river in Hindu mythology, is revered in many ways she is said to be the daughter of Rishi Mekala, the child of

the moon, and the sister of the Nagas. It was the Narmada who called upon Purukutsa to help the Nagas in their conflict with the Gandharvas, and in gratitude, the Nagas bestowed upon her a name that protects against snake venom (John Dowson, M.R.A.S. 80). Amish skillfully integrates mythological locations like the Dandaka forest, which stretches between the Godavari and Narmada rivers. In the Ramayana, this forest is described as a wilderness full of hermitages, wild beasts, and Rakshasas (John Dowson, M.R.A.S. 80). In Amish's version, at the center of Panchavati, a statue of Ram, Sita, and Lakshman honors their legacy.

The Naga Rajya Sabha council has made an important decision regarding the distribution of their medicine to the Brangas, who suffer from the plague due to the pollution caused by the manufacturing of nectar in Meluha. Queen Kaali has declared the war with Meluha over after the destruction of Mount Mandar, but the Naga members initially hesitate to share their medicine. The Lord of the People, however, persuades the Naga ministers with a powerful speech, and gold coins from King Chandrakethu are collected to secure the medicine for the Brangas for the next thirty years. The Nagas understand that withholding the medicine would violate the sacred principles of Bhoomidevi, a woman from the North who played a key role in shaping Naga society. The Lord of the People stresses that straying from her values would be sacrilegious, and no one dares to oppose her.

The Naga medicine is a powerful reddish paste made from rare medicinal plants and is known to treat dangerous diseases. It saves the lives of Karthik and Parvateshwarar in the story. The Nagas are perceived as mysterious beings, often wearing hoods and masks to conceal their identities. However, in a significant moment, Sati meets Maya, a Naga woman in the eastern palace of Kashi. Maya, the sister of King Athithikva, has a unique form two faces joined to one body and four arms extending from her shoulders. Their conversation reveals to Sati and the readers that the Nagas are not inherently evil, but rather individuals who are physically distinct and have suffered societal oppression.

Later, Sati encounters a woman from Iccawar whose face eerily resembles her own. This discovery stuns Sati, as she realizes this woman is her twin sister, abandoned by their father, Daksha, in childhood. Another revelation follows as Sati learns about her stillborn child, who is referred to as the Lord of the People and depicted with an elephant-like head. In an act of acceptance, Sati embraces both her son and sister, recognizing the deep pain her family has endured due to their physical and mental struggles and their marginalization by society.

Shiva's first meeting with Kali is striking; she appears as a form of Sati but with dark skin and two additional arms. She also wears a garland of skulls, symbolizing her fierce fight against adharma. Kali rules over Naga Land, situated along the Narmada River. In response to Kali's summons, Shiva gathers his entourage and embarks on a long journey to the Dandaka forest, passing through the Baranga region. Kali is portrayed as a warrior fighting injustice, representing the subaltern Naga community. Similarly, Lord Ganesh, traditionally known for removing ego, is reimagined in the story as a child with an elephant head.

The entrance to Panchavati is inscribed with the words "Truth" and "Beauty," reflecting the Naga people's values. Despite facing hardships from birth, the Nagas embody these qualities in their character. They endure societal rejection, with many believing their deformities are a punishment for sins from past lives. However, the true cause lies in the effects of their parents' overconsumption of Somaras poison, which alters the child's genetics, leading to their Naga identity. Throughout their lives, the Nagas endure social injustices and cruelty.

In the first book, Lord Ganesh is portrayed quite differently, as a character who takes on a terrorist-like role, attacking Sati and attempting to kidnap his mother. However, by the second novel, Ganesh's character becomes more complex. He is now a son seeking his mother's love and embodying virtues such as martial skill and goodness in the face of evil. Despite the struggles with his grandfather, King Daksha, Ganesh forgives him for the sake of peace. He experiences pain because of his physical form but remains gentle and compassionate. Ganesh's protective instincts toward his brother Karthik are evident even before birth, and he bravely defends him in the garden of Kashi, facing a tiger and Linger's threats.

At Queen Kaali's request, Shiva's convoy travels to Nagaland and reaches Panchavati, where they find a gate bearing the inscription "Satiyam. Soundarya. Truth. Beauty." In Panchavati, Shiva learns that the Meluhan scientist Brahaspati has survived and sought refuge in Nagaland with Lord Ganesh. Ganesh promises to keep Brahaspati's secret safe and provide him a life in Nagaland. When Shiva seeks retribution and punishment, Ganesh remains silent, keeping his promise to Brahaspati. Shiva recognizes Ganesh's loyalty, admiring his unwavering commitment even in difficult situations. E. M. W. Tillyard's *Myth and the English Mind* states that

Myth shapes reader's life, thought, and social, religious, and moral attitudes. The understanding of myth in literature is of utmost importance. A myth gets retold; it gets adapted or elaborated, taking different forms in literature. In the process of rumination, myth can be studied as a symbol, an allegory or a concept. The myth gives numerous connotations to suit the changing order of the society. (11-12)

Conclusion:

Shiva's journey takes a crucial turn when he reunites with his long-lost friend, Brahaspati, and this reunion unveils a deeper truth. It becomes clear that the true source of evil does not lie with the Nagas, but rather with the malevolent

transformation of the once-purifying nectar. This nectar, originally a gift of goodness, has fallen into darkness due to the excesses and greed of the Meluhan people. The resulting imbalance has caused a catastrophic environmental impact, with the Branga land suffering under the strain of a devastating plague. The Nagas, long blamed for these misfortunes, are in fact victims of this corrupt nectar, and their society has been marred by an unjust reputation. In this context, the symbol of the Naga, represented by the Om inscribed within the image of a snake, takes on profound significance. The snake is not just a symbol of malevolence, as it is often portrayed, but rather of regeneration, renewal, and new beginnings. For Shiva, this revelation marks a pivotal shift in his understanding, leading him to depart from Meluha. He openly criticizes the Meluhan emperors for their failure to recognize the dangerous consequences of allowing the nectar to infiltrate society, leading to corruption and widespread harm.

This turn of events brings to light a central moral lesson: a true leader does not prejudge an entire people based on preconceived notions or incomplete histories. Shiva's evolution as a leader throughout the story showcases the value of understanding the full context before forming opinions or making decisions. In a broader sense, this lesson is vital for leadership today, as it stresses the importance of empathy, thorough understanding, and fair judgment. Leaders, much like Shiva, must be open to learning the truth before acting, and they must take responsibility for the consequences of their actions. By doing so, they can guide their societies toward fairness and healing, much like Shiva's evolving understanding of the Nagas and the nectar's corruption ultimately leads to a new path forward for all.

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