

Reimagining Dharma: The Major Themes in Devdutt Pattanaik's Mythological Corpus

Prof. (Dr.) Binay Shankar Roy

Professor and Head

University Dept of English

BRA Bihar University, Muzaffarpur

Abstract

Devdutt Pattanaik has emerged as one of India's most prolific and widely read interpreters of mythology, bridging classical narratives and contemporary concerns across books such as *Myth=Mithya*, *Jaya*, *Sita*, *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You*, *The Pregnant King*, and *Business Sutra*. This article synthesizes and analyzes the major themes that recur in his oeuvre: (1) myth as a cultural operating system and a technology of meaning; (2) the relational and contextual ethics of dharma; (3) pluralism, perspectivism, and the decentralization of canonical authority; (4) gender fluidity, the queering of myth, and embodied knowledge; (5) hunger, fear, and exchange as drivers of social and economic behavior; (6) leadership, organization, and the Indian management imagination; and (7) the cartography of sacred time and space. Through close reading of representative texts, attention to Pattanaik's diagrams and narrative strategies, and engagement with the critical reception of his work, the paper argues that his project is not simply to retell stories but to scaffold contemporary hermeneutics of Indic thought—one that is pragmatic, inclusive, and oriented toward ethical decision-making in real life. The article also considers critiques regarding popularization, essentialism, and scholarly rigor, situating Pattanaik's approach within wider debates on myth, secular modernity, and decolonization of knowledge. It concludes that while his work occupies a hybrid space between scholarship and public pedagogy, its thematic coherence and cultural impact have reshaped how many readers in India and the diaspora encounter the categories of dharma, identity, and meaning.

Keywords: Devdutt Pattanaik; Dharma; Indian Mythology; Queer Myth; Pluralism; Business Sutra; Cultural Hermeneutics; Purushartha; Leadership; Narrative Ethics

Introduction: Myth as a Technology of Meaning

Devdutt Pattanaik is frequently introduced as a “mythologist,” but the term, in relation to his corpus, suggests less an academic discipline than a large-scale public pedagogy. He reads mythology as a living system that encodes the beliefs and anxieties of a culture—the “operating system” beneath our institutions and daily choices. In book after book, he argues that myths are not primitive falsehoods but frames that help us choose between competing

values: security and freedom, duty and desire, renunciation and participation, stability and change.

Where classical Indological scholarship often privileges philology and historical reconstruction, Pattanaik prioritizes function: what do stories do for people? How do they help a leader address conflict, a professional navigate ambiguity, a citizen think across difference? This functional lens is paired with a distinctive narrative aesthetic—concise chapters, diagrams, and tables; side-by-side summaries of multiple regional tellings; and a steady translation of metaphysical categories into relatable scenarios. As a result, his books serve simultaneously as entry-points for general readers and as heuristic devices for practitioners in education, management, and design.

This article traces the major themes that structure Pattanaik’s mythic imagination, showing how they interlock into a coherent system: a relational ethics of dharma, a pluralistic epistemology of perspectives, a deep attention to embodiment and gender variance, and a pragmatic theory of exchange and leadership. Together, these themes articulate an Indic moral psychology grounded not in commandments but in context.

Literature Context and Method

Pattanaik participates in a wider twentieth- and twenty-first-century conversation that includes scholars of myth (e.g., Mircea Eliade’s hierophany, Joseph Campbell’s monomyth), philosophers of hermeneutics (Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons”), and Indian intellectual traditions (Mimamsa, Vedanta, and Puranic exegesis). Unlike formal academic studies, his method is synthetic and comparative, placing Sanskrit and vernacular sources beside regional retellings, folk motifs, and contemporary dilemmas.

The present analysis adopts close reading of representative works—*Myth=Mithya* (myth as subjective truth), *Jaya* and *Sita* (epic retellings that foreground multiplicity), *Shikhandi* (queer perspectives), *The Pregnant King* (gender and power), and *Business Sutra* (organizational behavior). It also considers his public lectures and columns where core frameworks (e.g., hunger–fear, purushartha, yagna/exchange) are frequently articulated in distilled form. The aim is interpretive rather than adjudicative: to map thematic continuities and analyze their philosophical implications.

Myth as Cultural Operating System—“Myth = Mithya”

A foundational claim in Pattanaik’s work is that myth is not the opposite of truth but a kind of truth—subjective, symbolic, and socially efficacious. The Sanskrit “mithya” is not mere falsehood; it denotes that which is experiential and constructed, akin to what social theorists might call a “shared fiction” that organizes reality.

This reframing has two consequences. First, it relocates debates about historicity. Whether Krishna “really” existed matters less than how the Krishna-figure organizes a repertoire of attitudes—playfulness, strategic empathy, duty tempered by grace—that inform behavior.

Second, it makes myth ethically actionable. If myths code our worldviews, then retelling a story is not antiquarian recreation; it is cultural refactoring: shifting defaults of how we view self, other, and society.

In *Jaya*, Pattanaik demonstrates this by placing canonical episodes beside local variants, not to rank them but to reveal how different communities authorize different emphases: on fate or free will, on kingship or renunciation, on masculine heroics or maternal endurance. The moral is meta-moral: myths are mirrors, and communities choose which mirrors to look into.

Dharma as Relational and Contextual Ethics

If myth is a mirror, dharma is the act of reading the reflection responsibly. Pattanaik repeatedly insists that dharma is not a rulebook but a relational ethic shaped by context (*desha-kala-patra*: place-time-person). This is clearest in his treatments of the epics, where episodes that appear morally contradictory are interpreted as demonstrations of dharma's situational complexity.

For example, in *Sita*, Rama's decisions (from the exile to the later abandonment) are not flattened into hero-worship or condemnation; they are read as negotiations among competing dharmas: as king, husband, and symbol. Similarly, in *Jaya*, the Mahabharata's labyrinthine dilemmas—from Bhishma's vows to Arjuna's paralysis—become case studies in friction between personal duty and systemic responsibility.

This relational view is intensified by his frequent invocation of *purushartha* (dharma, artha, kama, moksha). Rather than a ladder with moksha at the top, Pattanaik treats them as simultaneous vectors that must be balanced. Any absolutization—artha without dharma, kama without empathy, or a spirituality that denies embodiment—produces distortion. The ethical task is not to eliminate desire or wealth but to harmonize them within a web of obligations.

Pluralism, Perspectivism, and the Decentered Canon

A consistent rhetorical move in Pattanaik's prose is the "parallel telling": placing versions of a story from different regions, Puranas, or performance traditions side by side. This move has a thesis: there is no single authorized epic, only a network of tellings that reflect the anxieties and aspirations of communities.

In *Jaya* and *Sita*, this pluralism is methodological (how the book is structured) and ethical (what readers are urged to value). Perspectivism—*darshan* as "gaze"—appears as a motif: how we look changes what we see. The same episode read from the vantage of Draupadi, Karna, or Krishna destabilizes certainty, inviting humility. Pattanaik thus cultivates an epistemic virtue: restraint in judgment.

This emphasis also functions as a soft decolonization. Rather than rejecting Western categories outright, he provincializes them, showing that "universal" models (linear progress, singular authorship, absolute commandments) are only one way to organize meaning. Indian

thought, he argues, tolerates paradox and multiplicity, and its stories teach us to live in non-binary spaces.

Gender, Queerness, and the Body as Knowledge

One of Pattanaik's most influential contributions to public discourse is the foregrounding of gender variance and non-heteronormative desire within Indic myth. *Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You* collates narratives of shape-shifting, same-sex partnerships, and non-binary embodiments, demonstrating that normative binaries are neither exhaustive nor universally enforced in the tradition.

The ethical point is not anachronistic endorsement of modern identities but recognition that the archive offers possibilities. By retrieving these possibilities, Pattanaik challenges the myth of a monolithically patriarchal or heteronormative canon. *The Pregnant King* fictionalizes this insight: the king's pregnancy becomes a meditation on power, care, lineage, and the instability of gendered roles.

Beyond identity, the body itself is epistemic. In many retellings, hunger, desire, and touch are not impurities to be expunged but information to be interpreted. The goddess traditions—Lakshmi's association with prosperity and hospitality, Kali's fierce embodiment of time and transformation—illustrate how embodiment becomes cosmic metaphor. This theme resists ascetic idealizations that denigrate the material and offers a householder's metaphysics: the divine as intimate with daily life.

Hunger, Fear, and the Logic of Exchange (Yagna)

Pattanaik's management writings, especially *Business Sutra*, elaborate a behavioral model anchored in two primal drives: hunger and fear. Hunger seeks resources and recognition; fear guards identity and status. Organizations, like epics, throng with characters animated by these forces. The leader's task is not to annihilate them but to ritualize them through fair exchange.

Here the Vedic category of *yagna* (sacrificial exchange) becomes a theory of value creation. Everyone eats because everyone feeds: resources (Lakshmi) circulate when relationships (Vishnu) are maintained, and they stagnate or flee when hoarded or disrespected. The metaphors are deliberately mythic—Lakshmi “resides” where she is welcomed—but their intent is diagnostic: cultures of control (Indra's fortress) perform differently from cultures of trust (Vishnu's hospitality).

The model nuances fashionable binaries like “Western vs Indian management.” Pattanaik argues that goal-obsession without attention to relationships breeds anxiety and churn, while relationship-obsession without accountability breeds complacency. Sustainable organizations choreograph hunger and fear through transparent rituals of decision-making, credit-sharing, and dissent.

Leadership, Responsibility, and the Ethics of Power

Building on exchange, Pattanaik develops a leadership ethic grounded in *dharma* and *darshan*. Leaders must cultivate perspective—seeing stakeholders as subjects rather than objects—and must shape rituals that encode fairness. Examples from the epics are read as leadership case studies:

- **Krishna** as the facilitator who expands others' perspectives (Arjuna's paralysis resolves when he reframes the battlefield as a moral theatre).
- **Rama** as the burdened sovereign navigating role-conflict, illustrating the weight of symbol-work in leadership.
- **Shiva** as the ascetic outsider whose energy must be integrated for civilizational balance (outsider talent within organizations).

These readings avoid simple morality tales. The same figure can be both exemplar and warning. Duryodhana, for instance, is a study in grievance-accumulation and entitlement; Bhishma demonstrates how vows without periodic review calcify into harm. The didactic effect is practical: leaders must establish review mechanisms (rituals) that keep pledges aligned with changing contexts.

Sacred Time, Sacred Space: Mapping the Indic Imaginary

Another through-line is Pattanaik's cartography of time and space. He differentiates *itihasa* (epics that anchor civilizational memory) from *Purana* (cycles that expand cosmology), and shows how geography—rivers, forests, pilgrimage circuits—shapes narrative movement. In *Jaya* and *Sita*, maps and marginalia emphasize that stories are not abstract; they are grounded in routes, thresholds, and borders.

This attention to sacred geography is simultaneously historical and phenomenological. Historically, multiple pilgrimage ecologies produce variant tellings; phenomenologically, journeys reconfigure identity. Forest exile is not merely punitive but initiatory; borderlands are laboratories for transformation; dwelling and wandering encode social theory. By making these spaces visible through diagrams, Pattanaik slows the reader's gaze, encouraging a meditative mode of reading.

Narrative Technique—Diagrams, Parallels, and the Pedagogy of Clarity

Pattanaik's signature technique is the insertion of diagrams, tables, and parallel summaries. Far from being ornamental, these devices enact his epistemology. Diagrams force readers to hold multiple variables together: purusharthas in tension, cycles of creation-dissolution, relationship networks among characters. Tables juxtapose regional variants, democratizing the canon by giving vernacular memory equal status with Sanskrit texts.

The effect is pedagogical: by making complexity legible, he equips readers to use myth hermeneutically in their own lives—to frame choices, negotiate roles, and respond to ambiguity. In this sense, his books are not mere retellings but toolkits.

Decolonization, Accessibility, and the Public Intellectual

Pattanaik's project participates in the decolonizing impulse to reclaim native categories without chauvinism. He neither rejects modernity nor submits to it as the only lens; he brokers a conversation. The language of his books—plain, analogical, vivid—expands access to conversations once restricted to scholars and clergy.

This accessibility also situates him within the ecology of the public intellectual. He occupies a space that mediates between academic rigor and mass pedagogy. In doing so, he courts the ambivalence reserved for popularizers: gratitude for clarity and irritation at simplification. Yet the very fact that his readers use his vocabulary—dharma as relational, Lakshmi as hospitality, exchange as yagna—indicates cultural impact.

Ethics and the Everyday—Hospitality, Non-Absolute Morality, and Compassion

One of Pattanaik's softest but most persistent themes is hospitality. Households that welcome the stranger, leaders who host dissent, communities that share surplus—these become the sites where Lakshmi lingers. Morality is not a list of prohibitions but a choreography of care.

Because the center is relational, the ethical posture is non-absolute. There are red lines—cruelty, humiliation, bad faith—but most choices demand context-sensitivity. This can frustrate readers seeking clear commandments; it also encourages maturity, because it demands that we grow in discernment (*viveka*). Compassion, in this framework, is not sentiment; it is technique: seeing the other as subject, calibrating exchange to their constraints, and refusing zero-sum framings.

Case Studies Across Key Works

Myth=Mithya

As manifesto, this book articulates the subjective nature of cultural truths. By distinguishing *deha* (body), *manas* (mind), and *atma* (self), he sketches a layered anthropology through which myths operate. The book's success lies in offering a vocabulary that readers can use outside the text; its risk is that compression can flatten nuance. Still, as a primer it establishes the stakes of his larger project: meaning-making, not mere story-telling.

Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata

Jaya exemplifies pluralism and case-driven ethics. By placing canonical and folk retellings in dialogue, it refuses the search for a single definitive Mahabharata. Ethical ambiguity is foregrounded: the Pandavas' righteousness is shadowed by complicity, and Draupadi's voice disrupts easy heroism. The visual apparatus—maps, family trees, sidebars—performs cognitive scaffolding, teaching readers how to hold contradiction without paralysis.

Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana

Here Pattanaik shifts the axis of the epic by choosing Sita's vantage. This gendered refocusing reveals a Ramayana less about royal duty than about the textures of feminine endurance, agency, and quiet power. The effect is not to invert patriarchy with matriarchy but to re-balance the moral gaze, showing how the epic's center can move without the story breaking.

Shikhandi and Other Queer Tales They Don't Tell You

This collection curates episodes of gender transformation, homoerotic bonds, and non-binary personhood. The upshot is twofold: the tradition contains a spectrum wider than modern stereotypes allow, and the presence of such stories implies an ethics of co-existence. While modern identities and ancient categories do not map perfectly, the historical fact of narrative diversity undermines exclusionary claims that erase it.

The Pregnant King

A novel rather than a retelling, *The Pregnant King* dramatizes gendered power and legitimacy. By literalizing a king's pregnancy, Pattanaik stages debates about succession, ritual authority, and the politics of embodiment. Fiction here becomes philosophical laboratory, demonstrating how mythic motifs can model conflicts modern institutions still fail to resolve.

Business Sutra (and allied writings such as The Success Sutra)

In these works, myth migrates into management. The move is not allegory but systems-thinking: how beliefs about self and world shape organizational design. Concepts like hospitality, gaze, exchange, and balance among purusharthas become tools to analyze culture, incentives, and conflict. The argument is that organizations are not machines but mythic collectives; change the myth and you change the behavior.

Critiques and Counterpoints

Three critiques recur in discussions of Pattanaik's work:

1. Popularization versus Scholarship:

Critics argue that his compression of sources and analogical method can blur historical layers or over-synthesize divergent traditions. This is partly a function of audience: his books aim for accessibility. The counterpoint is that accessibility and rigor are not mutually exclusive; the question is whether simplifications mislead. A responsible response is to read him as a gateway rather than an endpoint, and to pair his works with specialist scholarship when deeper study is intended.

2. Essentialism about "Indian" and "Western" Mindsets:

In *Business Sutra* and public lectures, contrasts between "Western goal-orientation" and "Indian relationship-orientation" are sometimes read as essentializing. Pattanaik's

more careful passages treat these as tendencies or archetypes rather than inherent traits; yet readers can over-literalize them. The charitable reading is to use these binaries heuristically while testing them against empirical organizational research.

3. Normativity under the Guise of Pluralism:

Some worry that celebrating pluralism can inadvertently normalize conservative structures by translating them into “context.” Pattanaik’s own emphasis on dignity and mutuality suggests a floor: humiliation, exploitation, and dehumanization are not justified by context. Still, vigilance is needed to ensure that “relational ethics” does not become relativism.

Contributions: What Pattanaik Adds to Contemporary Discourse

Despite these debates, Pattanaik’s thematic architecture offers several durable contributions:

- **A usable hermeneutic of dharma:** Contextual, relational, and practicable—suitable for educators, leaders, and citizens.
- **An inclusive archive:** Making queer and gender-variant narratives visible within mainstream pedagogy, thereby widening cultural imagination.
- **Pedagogical tooling:** Diagrams and parallel tellings as methods for teaching complexity and humility.
- **Cultural decolonization:** Re-centering Indic categories without chauvinism, enabling a bilingual thinking that moves between global modernity and local wisdom.
- **Application to institutions:** Translating metaphysical insights into organizational design and leadership ethics.

Implications for Readers, Educators, and Leaders

For **readers**, Pattanaik recommends a posture: read for perspectives, not proofs. Ask what a story does to your assumptions; let competing tellings unfreeze your certainties. For **educators**, his tools enable curricular design that honors regional diversity and multiple lenses—history, performance, ethics, and psychology—within a single module. For **leaders**, his frameworks suggest that culture work is not soft; it is system design. Rituals of recognition, transparent conflict-resolution, and symbolic acts (how we welcome, who we seat where, what we celebrate) are strategic levers.

At all levels, the main implication is to treat myths as living scripts that we can edit responsibly. We inherit the repertoire, but we choose the emphasis.

Conclusion: From Retelling to Reframing

Devdutt Pattanaik’s body of work is best understood as an experiment in reframing. He treats myth as a dynamic grammar for making sense of life, not as a fossil to be curated in a

museum of heritage. Through the interlocking themes of relational dharma, perspectival pluralism, embodied knowledge, exchange and leadership, and sacred cartography, he offers readers a way to think that is simultaneously ancient and contemporary.

There is a risk in any grand reframing: that nuance is lost or that the frame becomes a new orthodoxy. Yet the very themes he champions—humility before multiplicity, attentiveness to context, respect for embodied difference—contain correctives to such risks. If myths are mirrors, the ethical question is whether they help us see more of ourselves and others with clarity and compassion. Pattanaik's project, with its accessible idiom and schematic precision, answers in the affirmative: the stories we inherit can enlarge our liberty to act well, provided we learn how to read them.

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