

CONNECTING INDIA WITH ITS DIASPORA

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MAHATMA

Wager of peace, warrior of non-violence, shaker of empire, conscience keeper of truth... The man was medium and message at once. Austere, unafraid, resolute, he bent an Empire and willed a nation

MINISTRY OF OVERSEAS INDIAN AFFAIRS

Meet the mythologist

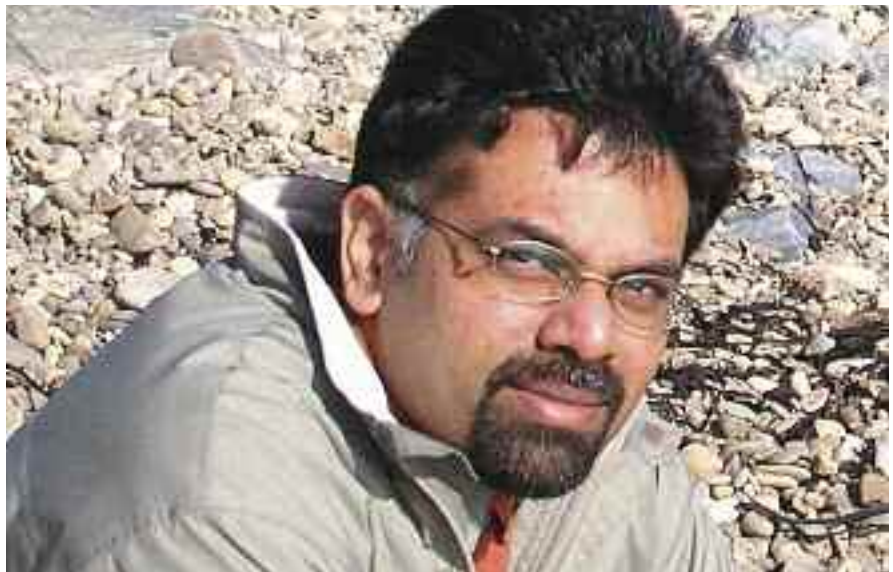
My novel shows the different ways we live with and in mythology in India... we mediate our lives between the beliefs of the past and the hopes and fears of the future with our myths, says **Vamsee Juluri**

Archetypal India is the land of gods, myths, and legends. In his new book — *The Mythologist*, the Hyderabad-born Vamsee K. Juluri chronicles the meaning of mythology and its influence and impact on real life, as he unfolds the life of Parashuram, the fictional character and protagonist of the book.

Born in 1969, Vamsee is a novelist, author and professor of media studies at the University of San Francisco. He did his schooling at Hyderabad Public School and went to Bangalore in the 1980s to study engineering. Later, he decided to study journalism and joined IIMC, New Delhi. There, he discovered a new world of media. Fascinated by the incredible media revolution that was taking place in India in the early 1990s, he followed his dream. Vamsee received his Ph.D in communication from the University of Massachusetts, in 1999. His dissertation was on music television audiences. Later, he went on to write a book on it — *Belonging in Indian Music Television and the Ideals of Indian Cinema*. He is also the author of the critically acclaimed *Becoming a Global Audience: Longing and Belonging in Indian Music Television*.

Vamsee Juluri spoke to *L. Jyotimala*. Excerpts:

How have you weaved the story of *The*



***Mythologist* into a tapestry of legends and reality?**

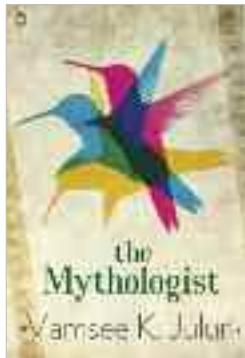
I started the story very much like a mythic one, with some sort of an allegory about 'media' in mind. In time, I realised that the richest parts of mythology is vastly visible in our real life itself; how we go in and out of our legends in our media, politics, and inner lives. So, the story is basically a 'real-life' one, but various parts of legends have also crept into the book in the forms of films, political propaganda, and finally, the protagonist's own fevered fantasies.

Could you tell us about the protagonist of your book Parashuram?

Parashuram is the bridge between the India of the past and India of the future. He aspires to an old-world idealism he associates with his Big Grandfather, a Gandhian movie director, believing that somehow he can carry his family's legacy of art and public service into the future. Of course, he finds that the real world and the real India of politics and schemers is far beyond his grasp. He is an everyman, albeit in a somewhat unusual way.

In the book, a lot of 'real' incidents, human emotions, events have been highlighted. How much of it, is fiction/non-fiction?

Book: *The Mythologist*
Author: Vamsee Juluri
Publisher: Penguin India
Price: ₹299



MYTHOLOGY, MEDIA AND THE FUTURE OF HINDUISM

The gods of Hinduism have never been up there in some cold palace playing cruel whimsical games of fate with us humans. Instead, they have taken their place among us. They have let us call them friend, cousin, son, mother, teacher, and adore them as such. For it is only in relationships that we humans adore, and it is only in adoration that we learn the lessons of the gods: to live in friendship with ourselves and others, to attain a sense of justice in our actions, and to surrender to serenity. That is the story about our gods, and it is a story that has been told countless times over the millennia in words, songs, gestures, sculpture, and art.

Since the early 20th century, the stories of the gods have found new forms in the mass media. Indian cinema in its early years was almost entirely a mythological genre. Even when the Bombay film industry moved away from them, the thriving regional language cinemas of South India produced grand mythologicals well into the 1970s. In the 1980s, when Indian television came of age, its most popular serials were mythologicals. The media boom of recent years brought forth a new wave of animated mythological shows and movies. And for nearly four decades, one distinguished comic book series, *Amar Chitra Katha*, has made the stories of the gods familiar to young modern readers. (An excerpt from his article in the *Huffington Post*)

The parallels to real life events reflect a particular generational journey through the history of modern India. The book begins at a time when an old tradition was on the verge of dying (the mythological cinema of the Gandhian-era pioneers), and follows the new shapes that cinema and politics took ever since, especially in South India. It climaxes in the Silicon Valley world of dotcoms and marriage bureaus, and the dawn of the age of a new made-for-TV sort of terrorism. I feel that a lot of the emotional energy in the book comes from a real life memory of some of these events. But the characters and situations, of course, all took a fictional trajectory of their own.

How is your book different from other books based on mythology/gods?

Very different. Most of the books based on mythology tend to focus on retelling a particular story about the gods. My novel moves away from myths and looks at life of a peculiarly 'myth' obsessed character as a whole. I think, it shows the different ways we live with and in mythology in India. We mediate our lives between the beliefs of the past and the hopes and fears of the future with our myths.

Your book also talks about Tamil and Telugu film industries. Being one of your areas of expertise, how would you

describe the reach of the industry among the Indian diaspora?

The diaspora has become very important, commercially and to an extent creatively too in these industries. In San Francisco Bay Area, for example, we have theatres that screen not just Hindi but also regional language films. Conversely, we see some of the desires of the diaspora also being given shape in some recent Telugu and Tamil films, such as the nostalgia for the Indian village and traditional customs. Recently, the old Telugu mythological classic *Maya Bazaar* was released in colour and there was quite some excitement about it among the diaspora.

Stories about gods and legends have always fascinated the Indian audience. Be it books, films, TV soaps... Do you think writing on gods, mythology is an easy way to captivate the Indian readers?

Mythology is indeed a well-worn theme in Indian popular art and culture, and one can count on familiarity from the audience. But there has also been a glut of it in recent years since the media explosion, and it has sometimes been taken to ludicrous extents. I view mythology as somehow less frivolous than that. But some forms of mythology do tend to be more commercially appealing than others.

What do myths mean to you? How do they act as a moralising, enlightening factor in today's world?

Myths, in the sense of stories about the gods, mean a lot to me, as they do to many Indians. I do not think they are a literal truth, but neither do I think they are mere stories for us to distort as we please. I think they are the bedrock of our commonsense and values, but how we view them must be reworked from time according to the needs of the times. For example, in the case of my work, I see the need in today's world to rediscover the Gandhian ideal of 'truth', because of how easily truth has been supplanted by lies in media, politics, business and elsewhere.

How do students in the University of San Francisco perceive India and its culture, mythology, cinema, and above all Gandhian philosophy?

Very positively. It has been a pleasure for me to learn about India and Indian thought all over again through the eyes of so many young and idealistic students. There's a lot of interest in Indian cinema. But what is most heartening is the degree of respect I get from students for Gandhi and Gandhian philosophy. When some of my USF students came to India for a summer class some time ago, they impressed me a lot with their application of Gandhian ideas in understanding their experiences here. ■